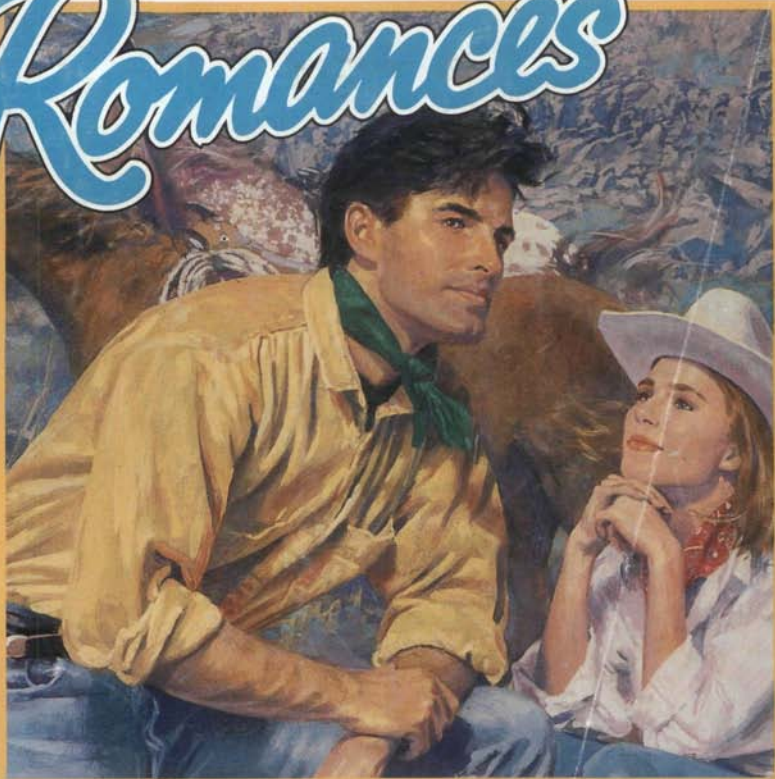


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Romances



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A Personal Moment With Author Candace Schuler



"I was born in Northern California, but I've lived in almost every corner of the United States, from a schooner anchored in Hawaii's Ala Wai Harbor, to a loft in New York's Greenwich Village, to the foot of Mount Bachelor in Oregon, to deep in the heart of Dallas, Texas, to the Maryland suburbs outside of Washington, D.C., to the frequently frozen plains of Eden Prairie, Minnesota, to the home of Thoroughbreds and bluegrass in Louisville, Kentucky, to currently, southern New Jersey." Of course, Candace also had to visit overseas! "I've traveled to Canada, Panama, Singapore, Malaysia, the British Isles, France and Italy." And in between packing and unpacking, she's somehow found the time to write over 20 contemporary romance novels!

When she's not writing or traveling, Candace likes to relax by reading, cooking—she's earned a certificate in French cooking—doing cross-stitch, going to movies or taking adult-education classes. "The more offbeat, the better," she says, "because you never know when some interesting bit of information will come in handy for a book." Among her more interesting classes have been *How To Be a Private Detective*, *Limousine Driver Training*, *Handgun Use and Safety*, *Belly Dancing*, *Modern Witchcraft*, *Landscape Design*, and *Past Life Regression*, all subjects which have—or will—come up in one of her books.

Can you guess which class was perfect for *SOUL MATES*?



*From the desk of
Rebecca Pearson, Publisher*



Dear Romance Reader,

The lazy days of summer are here! We at World's Best Romances hope you're making time to bask in the warmth of the sun and are treating yourself to a special vacation—even if it's just for a weekend or a long, luxurious soak in the tub.

And thanks for choosing World's Best Romances for your reading pleasure. We've selected some wonderful stories by four of our most talented authors in this issue. And much-loved author Candace Schuler has taken the time to give us some of her personal thoughts on writing, so look for that article.

You may have noticed that my name is new. Candy Lee recently accepted an exciting new position, and is now working on the Harlequin business overseas. We know she'll keep all of the romance readers in Europe happy! I'm delighted to have the chance to work with the World's Best Romances. So I'd love to hear from *you*, the readers. Please let me know which stories you respond to, and what—and who!—you're interested in for future issues.

Please write: *Attention: Rebecca Pearson
Harlequin World's Best Romances
Letters to the Editor
P.O. Box 37256
Boone, IA 50037-0256*

Stay cool and enjoy the summer.

Enjoy,

Rebecca Pearson

Rebecca Pearson, Publisher

P.S.: Remember...Harlequin makes any time special!

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CANDACE SCHULER

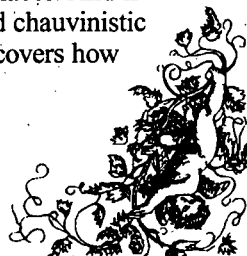

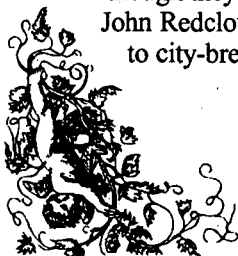


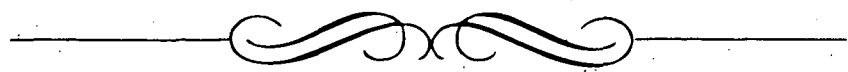
Candace Schuler was born in Santa Cruz, California, and grew up between the seaside and a small family farm across the bay from San Francisco. Since marrying, she and her husband have traveled extensively. When she's not writing or traveling, Candace likes to relax by reading, doing cross-stitch or taking adult-education classes. She is the author of over 20 contemporary romances.



Soul Mates

It is said that soul mates will intuitively recognize each other, though they meet in the most unexpected places. And if John Redcloud at first seems too macho and chauvinistic to city-bred Victoria Dillon, she soon discovers how deceptive appearances can be!





Victoria Dillon stood bareheaded under the scorching Arizona sun, silently debating. Should she use her last bottle of Perrier to quench her own thirst or in the radiator of her overheated Mercedes?

She'd pulled off the road for the third time, trying not to let the steam billowing from under the hood of the sleek white car throw her into a dither.

She shaded her eyes and peered down the road both ways for the fourth time in as many minutes. Nothing. Just a two-lane blacktop highway stretching into infinity and a barren red-dust desert.

She was stranded in the middle of the Navajo reservation, with no water, no knowledge of the high-powered car she drove and not a service station in sight. She did have a six-ounce bottle of orange-flavored Perrier, about a quart of warm Diet Coke and an owner's manual for the Mercedes. Somewhere.

"Glove compartment," she mumbled, flipping through maps, motel brochures and gas receipts.

When she finally found it, the manual listed several possible causes for the engine to overheat, aside from no water in the radiator. But she knew that wasn't the problem.

A leak in the hose was listed, but it looked fine to her. Fat, smooth and black, presumably connected at both

ends to whatever it was supposed to be connected to.

She straightened, lifting the heavy sheaf of midnight hair off the back of her neck with one elegant hand.

"Check the fan belt," she read. Victoria squinted under the open hood of the car again.

Where was the fan belt? What did it look like?

She stuck her head farther under the open hood. So engrossed was she that she failed to hear the soft crunch of tires as a truck stopped behind her.

JOHN REDCLOUD pulled up behind the disabled Mercedes, wondering if the rest of the woman would live up to the promise of those gorgeous legs. Wondering, too, what she was doing out here all by herself.

The desert was no place for people who didn't know how to take care of themselves. One look told him that she didn't. The gauzy white summer skirt, the flimsy sandals, the flashy gold-trimmed car all said, *city woman*.

Grabbing his straw cowboy hat, John shouldered open the door of his dusty Chevy pickup. His booted feet hit sunbaked earth with the soft thud of a cat.

Shading his eyes from the blazing sun, he slammed the door of his truck.

The woman jumped and jerked upright, turning toward him.

The promise of her legs had not been an empty one.

She was reed slender, elegant and delicately built. Her shiny hair, raven black and almost Indian straight, fell from a precise center part to brush against her shoulders. The classic pageboy style and feathery bangs framed the sharp elegant bones of her face.

John sighed heavily. He had a weakness for such women, despite a lot of hard-learned lessons about them.

At his first step Victoria dropped her oversize sunglasses into place on the bridge of her nose and tented her hand above them to see past the glare of the sun.

The man walking toward her was tall. He wore faded dusty jeans and a dirt-smeared denim workshirt, unbuttoned and hanging open over his smooth coppery chest. The sleeves were rolled halfway up his forearms, and he wore old leather work gloves. A beautiful silver buckle set with a large square of polished turquoise glinted just below his navel.

Ranger buckle, Victoria said to herself. *Late 1800s. Probably Navajo.*

He stopped less than two feet in front of her. "Need some help, miss?" he asked softly.

Victoria could make out the curve of his jaw and a hint of firm lips, but his eyes were hidden by the brim of his hat.

It didn't matter, she decided. Help

had arrived. And who'd have thought to meet a Greek god here?

"Boy, do I! I was beginning to think I'd driven into the twilight zone and there was no one left in the world but me."

"The desert's a big place," he agreed, then motioned toward the car. "What's the problem?"

"I'm not real sure," Victoria smiled up at her rescuer. *I know you can help me* that smile said. It made most people want not to disappoint her.

It made the small hairs rise on the back of John's neck. He also had a thing about beautiful women who thought a smile was all it took to get through life. His ex-wife had been one.

"Something's wrong with the cooling system, I think," Victoria said then. "The temperature gauge keeps climbing into the red."

He nodded and pulled off one of his gloves. Stuffing it into his waistband, he ducked to lean over the engine. A small silver pendant dangled from a leather thong around his neck.

"Here's your problem," he said finally, and waved his hand toward the engine. "No fan belt."

"What happened to it?" Victoria asked.

"I imagine it fell off somewhere," he said dryly. "I'll have to rig up something that'll get you as far as the gas station in Chinle." He rubbed his chin, thinking. "Got another belt besides the one you're wearing?" he said, pushing up the brim of his hat.

His eyes were as Greek-god perfect as the rest of him. That indefinable color known as hazel, they glittered like pale jewels against his smooth coppery skin.

It took all her suddenly scattered concentration to answer his question. "Yes, I have another belt," she said. "In my luggage. But what for?"

"To use as an emergency fan belt. It'd have to be narrower than the one you've got on, though. Then again..." He reached out and clasped her waist in both hands.

Victoria stiffened in surprise.

"Hey. Whoa, there." John steadied her. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just wanted to measure—"

What he just wanted to do, he realized, was exactly what he *was* doing. Touch her. He wanted to cup the tempting swell of her breasts, to run his fingers slowly down the length of her gorgeous legs. He wanted... John yanked his hands away as if he'd been burned.

"Never mind. It'd be too small, anyway. Your waist isn't any bigger than a skinny twelve-year-old's." He turned away. "I'll see if I have anything in my truck I can use."

Victoria stood where she was, stifling the urge to look and see if his hands had actually left burn marks on her outfit. She sighed almost regretfully. He was one of the most beautiful men she had ever laid eyes on. *Does he come by that body naturally, she wondered, or does he have to work at it?* She wondered if he

worked out at a health club, pumping iron like her brother Conrad.

Honest labor, she decided. His muscles weren't the overdeveloped kind. Besides, she doubted that the Navajo reservation would have an organized health club. She could picture him chopping wood, though, or digging post holes or hoisting bales of hay.

He would be shirtless, his bare arms and shoulders and back gleaming with the sheen of healthy exertion, his chestnut brown hair curling damply around his ears.

She would tiptoe up behind him, she decided dreamily, and run the tip of her fingernail down the hollow of his spine. He would drop his hay hooks and turn. His hands would envelop her waist, pulling her to him. His head would bend toward hers, his mouth— "There. That ought to hold it."

Victoria snapped out of her daydream. He wasn't looking at her. *Thank God!* "Is it fixed?"

"Temporarily." He cut the trailing ends of the rawhide he'd used and tossed them into his toolbox. "It'll get you as far as Chinle. And I'll be right behind you in case you have any trouble," he added.

Victoria averted her eyes. "That really isn't necessary."

He looked at her. "Yes, it is. You could break down again before you get to the gas station. Watch your fingers." The hood slammed shut. "Besides, there's only one road. And we're traveling in the same direction."

"Oh, yes. Of course. I guess we'd better not waste any more time, then."

"Guess not," John agreed easily, but the hairs on the back of his neck bristled at her lady-of-the-manor tone. *Spoiled little twit. Doesn't she know how to say thank you?* He fastened the toolbox locks and stood up—just as Victoria rounded the front of the car.

His shoulder brushed against her thigh, the rough denim shirt snagging and lifting the gauzy material of her skirt as he straightened. She gasped and stepped back, reaching out with both hands to push it down. But not before John had caught a fleeting glimpse of a slender thigh, a bare hip and the rounded curve of a firm buttock.

All she had under her skirt was a scrap of white lace and the longest, most gorgeous legs he had ever seen.

Altered images of her long bare legs and tiny lace panties began flickering through his mind with lightning speed. Different poses. Different positions. Different settings. But all with the same theme.

"Sorry about that," he mumbled. "I hope I didn't get you dirty."

"No...no, it's fine." Their eyes met.

For Victoria it was like looking into the golden-hued eyes of a mountain lion. A hungry mountain lion.

For John it was as frustrating as hell. She was still wearing her sunglasses. God, he hated sunglasses!

City woman, he reminded himself sternly, as if the words were an incantation.

"Well, let's get a move on," he said gruffly. "Get in."

Victoria's murmured "Thank you" was barely audible as she settled gingerly into the driver's seat.

"Chinle is about ten miles straight down the highway." He bent to speak to her through the open window. "Keep it under fifty and don't use the air conditioner, and you'll be fine."

Eyes straight ahead, Victoria nodded. "Okay, fine. And...and thank you," she added belatedly.

She put the car into gear, stepped on the gas and shot out onto the highway. A small cloud of dust and gravel rose from beneath her rear tires.

John stood still for a second, staring at the rapidly receding car. *Spoiled, ungrateful little twit*, he thought, and turned toward his pickup. As he steered back onto the highway, the Mercedes was already little more than a white blur. She might be holding it to fifty, but he doubted it. *Drives like a bat out of hell*, he thought, and somehow it didn't surprise him. Women like her—driving cars like that—usually did.

Victoria had covered several miles before she remembered to slow down. "The fan belt, Victoria," she mumbled to herself, fighting the urge to speed. The last thing she needed was to break down and have to accept his help again.

The man was pure Neanderthal, she fumed silently. Running around with his chest hanging out like that. Showing off his muscles. And no doubt expecting her to drool all over him.

Which, to her embarrassment, was exactly what she had done. Had he seen her doing it?

A sudden graphic picture formed in her mind of the two of them lying on the front seat of his pickup, their clothes half off and tangled around them, their passion-slicked bodies straining toward fulfillment.

She shook her head, denying the fantasy—and the rush of heat that had pooled between her thighs.

"Forget it," she said out loud. "The car's fine. There's a gas station up ahead. You never have to see or speak to the man again."

She slowed the car, turned left into the service station and put her hand out the window, thumb and forefinger circled to show that everything was okay; he could drive on.

But he slowed to turn in behind her.

"Fill 'er up?"

Victoria turned as a service-station attendant peered into her window, his round face shaded by a Dodgers baseball cap, his expression unsmiling.

"No, I don't need any gas, thank you," she said shakily, wondering if Navajo men ever smiled. "Well, actually, I guess I do. But my main problem is the fan belt. It's broken." She reached down and popped the hood release. "I'll show you."

A large brown hand settled over her door handle, pulling it open. "What the lady is trying to say, Willie—" he cupped her elbow, lifting her out of the driver's seat "—is that she's operating with a jerry-rigged fan belt and she needs a new one." He glanced

down at her. "Isn't that right, little lady?"

"Yes, that's right," Victoria agreed tightly. *If he calls me "little lady" just one more time...* She eased her elbow out of his hand, turning to the station attendant.

"Well, I dunno," he said slowly. "That's not exactly a Chevy you're drivin'." He looked up. "Whaddaya think, John? Is there a Mercedes dealer in Flagstaff?"

"Probably. If not, you could always call Phoenix."

"Yeah, Phoenix for sure. Might have to wait two, maybe th—"

"Excuse me... Willie, isn't it?" Victoria's voice, soft, low and icy broke between them.

"Yes, ma'am. Willie Salt."

"Well, Mr. Salt, I am entirely capable of handling a discussion about the repair of my car myself." She was being rude, but enough was enough. "Am I making myself clear?"

Willie Salt nodded.

"Good." She turned. "As for you, Mr....?"

"John'll do."

Victoria nodded and held out her hand.

John enclosed it in his own. It was soft and small but surprisingly strong.

"Thank you for your help, John. I appreciate it." She withdrew her hand and turned to Willie Salt.

He had been dismissed. By an expert. *The little twit dismissed me as casually as if I were her butler.* He couldn't let her get away with it. "Little lady?"

Victoria's head snapped around. "Yes? What is it?"

John grinned. "I'll be at the café across the street when you need me."

"Need you?" Her chin rose. "I won't need you."

"Oh, I think you will." He turned and sauntered back to his pickup.

Twenty minutes later, from her perch atop her suitcase by Willie's soft-drink machine, she watched him drive back. He pulled up. "Need a ride, little lady?"

For a moment Victoria considered telling him what to do with his ride. But she was hot. And sweaty. She wanted an aspirin. And a bath. And a turkey club sandwich.

Willie Salt had told her it would be a couple of hours before he could give her a lift to the motel. And three days, at least, before a fan belt arrived from Phoenix. Since Chinle didn't have a taxi service, she eyed the man in the pickup. "Does that thing have air conditioning?"

He grinned. "Sure thing, little lady."

Victoria gritted her teeth and got in.

*

"ARE YOU SURE no one's left a message for me?" Victoria asked the smooth-faced Navajo woman behind the counter of the Thunderbird Lodge.

"I'm sorry. There have been no messages for you, Miss Dillon. There are no phones in the canyon, you know, so someone must come," the receptionist said.

She wasn't dealing with the hustle and bustle of Phoenix, Victoria reminded herself. Her sister-in-law, Lindsay, had warned her about the difficulties of communicating with the residents of the Canyon de Chelly before she left on this buying trip. But it was already after ten o'clock, and business was business. Or should be.

You'd think Mrs. Redcloud would have found a way to get a message to me by now, she thought, plopping herself down in her chair.

"Life moves at a slower pace in Navajoland," Lindsay had warned. "So relax and enjoy it."

Easy for Lindsay to say, she thought. *Of course! Lindsay!*

That was why there was no message. Maria Redcloud wasn't expecting Victoria. Lindsay was the expert—the one who drove here from Phoenix every summer to buy hand-made rugs and blankets for the family department store's Indian Arts Boutique. But Lindsay was pregnant with twins. And Victoria, at loose ends since her divorce eight months ago, had volunteered to make the trip in her place. She hurried toward the desk. "Do you have a message for Lindsay Cullen?"

But the receptionist's black eyes were focused just beyond the glass-paned doors. And a smile was curving up the corners of her generous mouth.

It was him. The white knight with the Greek-god physique and the condescending manner. And he looked just as perfect in clean jeans and a but-

toned shirt as he had yesterday all dirty and bare chested.

"Good morning, John," the Indian woman said to him. "What can I do for you?"

Victoria heard his boot heels click against the floor as he crossed the lobby behind her. She shifted sideways, edging around a tall, potted cactus, wishing that she hadn't been quite so outspoken about his manners when he'd dropped her off at the lodge yesterday.

He'd called her "little lady" once too often with that half-amused look in his hazel eyes, and she'd given in to the urge to tell him exactly what he could do with his male superiority. She might have been a tad more diplomatic if she'd known she'd run into him again.

"Mornin', Ruth," he said. "I'm looking for one of your guests. Lindsay Cullen. Grandmother was supposed to meet her here this morning."

Grandmother? Victoria thought. *His grandmother?*

The Indian woman flipped through a card file. "She's not here, John. Sorry."

"Well, darn it all. Grandmother wanted me to fetch her out to the canyon."

Victoria sighed, accepting the inevitable. "Excuse me," she said, and stepped around the cactus.

Both heads turned toward her.

"I'm Lindsay's sister-in-law. I'm here in her place, to see Mrs. Redcloud," she added, still not looking at

the man she could sense was staring intently at her.

"Oh, yes. Yes." The receptionist looked up at John. "This lady's been waiting for a message since a little after nine."

Steeling herself, Victoria turned to meet his gaze.

"Well, well," drawled John. "If it isn't the little lady with no fan belt. I didn't see you there," he said, hazel eyes running over her appreciatively.

She was dressed all in white again: a crisp, sleeveless white dress that made her smooth, tanned skin look like honey; a wide white leather belt that wrapped snugly around her tiny waist; strappy white sandals. He wondered if she was wearing those scanty scraps of white lace underneath her ladylike little dress.

"So," he said, "how're you feeling after your— What was it you called it? A 'thoroughly unpleasant experience at the hands of a caveman,' wasn't it?"

Victoria's chin lifted. "I believe *Neanderthal* was the word I used."

"Yeah, that was it. I don't believe I've ever been called a *Neanderthal* before," he said easily.

"Really?" she murmured. "I find that hard to believe." Her eyes held his with a level, challenging look.

"You gonna start calling me nasty names again?" John said lazily.

Victoria's low laugh bubbled out then, taking her temper with it. "No, not this time." She smiled up at him. "Shall we start over?" She held out her right hand. "I'm Victoria Dillon,"

she said formally, "and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

John took her hand in his. "John Redcloud. I'm pleased to meet you, too, Miss Dillon."

"Victoria, please," she said.

They dropped hands quickly, both of them denying the quick, hot flash of feeling that sizzled between them.

Spoiled city woman. John cleared his throat. "We'd better get a move on." He nodded a farewell to the receptionist. "See you around, Ruth."

"Tell Grandmother I'll drop up later this afternoon," the woman responded.

"I'll tell her."

"Your sister?" Victoria asked as they crossed the lobby.

"Cousin." He pulled open the door. "What happened to Lindsay that she couldn't come herself?"

"Impending motherhood," Victoria said. "Twins. She just found that out a couple of weeks ago, and my brother Conrad—her husband—decided he didn't want her driving all over Arizona by herself."

He nodded, his eyes drawn to the gentle lift and sway of her breasts under the white dress. She wasn't wearing a bra. "You'll have to change your clothes, you know."

"Why?" She looked down at herself, then back up at him. "What's the matter with my clothes?"

Arrogant little twit, he thought, admiring the aggressive thrust of her chin. He moved a step closer.

"Well?" she demanded, all but tapping her foot.

"You sure do fire up real easy," he said. "It makes your eyes go all sparkly and..."

"And what?" she prodded.

"Hot," he said, low.

Victoria felt herself flush. "That's all men like you ever think about, isn't it?"

"What?" He brushed his fingertip over her lashes. "Your eyes?"

She swayed toward him slightly, her lids drifting closed. "No, se—" She caught herself before she said it. Sex. It was what *she* was thinking about. *What's the matter with you, Victoria?* But it was too late.

Instinctively, John reached out and his hands closed over her bare arms, lifting her to him. His head bent. His mouth covered hers.

Victoria gasped, her hands rising to push him away. But his tongue slipped between her open lips, hot and sweet, and she lost all will to resist. Her head fell back under the bruising pressure of his kiss.

My God, she thought. Where had all this come from? This hunger? This searing heat? She was humming—*throbbing*—with needs and desires she'd never felt before.

But then, suddenly, his mouth lifted from hers, his hands let go of her arms, and it was over.

"Well, now that we've got that out of the way," he said, "I guess we'd better get a move on."

Victoria couldn't move. *Out of the way?*

"Grandmother's waiting," he said tersely.

His grandmother, yes. "I have to change my clothes first," she said. It was the only thing she could think of that made any sense. "What should I change into?"

"Jeans, if you own such a thing." His voice was gruff, almost angry, but she didn't notice. "You go change, and I'll meet you out front."

"Okay," she agreed, turning toward her room.

"Try not to take all day about it!" he hollered after her, enraged by her total lack of response—and his own lack of restraint.

He hadn't meant to kiss her at all, he fumed. She was exactly the kind of woman he'd promised himself never to get involved with again.

THERE WAS a whole group of people milling around in front of the gift shop when she got there, but Victoria didn't see John.

"Would you like to buy a ticket for the canyon tour, miss?" a young Indian girl asked.

"No, thank you. I'm looking for John Redcloud."

"You might check down by the corral. His truck was parked there earlier. Just on the other side of those trees."

Victoria nodded. "Thank you." She slipped her sunglasses back on, making a concerted effort to tamp down her rising annoyance as she followed the girl's directions. He'd told her not to take all day, then wasn't

where he said he'd be. She could see his pickup truck, but no John.

And then, suddenly, all her annoyance disappeared as she caught sight of the corral and the horses. Most of them were run-of-the-mill riding-stable horses, though three or four of them showed promise of more spirit. One was a real beauty, a gleaming bay mare with more than a trace of Arabian ancestry.

"Oh, you beauty, you," Victoria crooned, climbing onto the lowest rung of the fence. Leaning over, she held out her hand, palm up. "Come here."

The horse approached with a mincing sideways step, wheeled away with a nervous snort, then pranced back.

The velvet nose just touched Victoria's fingertips. Warm breath blew across her palm. Victoria let the mare smell her, then stroked the horse's velvety-soft muzzle. "Sorry, girl," she apologized. "I haven't got anything for you."

"Here, try this." A strong brown hand appeared over Victoria's shoulder, but the horse shied away. John dropped a half apple into Victoria's palm. "Oh, come on, Scarlett," he chided. "Quit being such a flirt and take it."

The horse pranced back, took the apple and then crowded against the fence, looking for more.

"Is she yours?" Victoria asked.

John nodded. "Picked her up at auction four years ago. She came as a package deal with her mother." He

scanned the corral. "That roan over there."

Victoria looked where he pointed. The roan mare was nothing special. "Her sire must have been something else."

"Must have," John agreed. "I take it you know something about horses?"

Victoria climbed higher, then turned and sat, balancing on the top rail. "I have an Arabian of my own. Ali." She patted Scarlett's neck. "I ride almost every day when I'm home."

"Would you like to ride now?"

"Now?" Her hand stilled on the mare's red hide. "I'd love to ride into the canyon. Is Scarlett for hire?"

"Not on your life," John waved toward the corral. "Pick any other horse you want, though."

Victoria scanned the horses. "That one," she said finally. "The buckskin gelding."

John was impressed. Rover was second only to Scarlett. "Fine" was all he said, oddly disturbed to realize that she was a good judge of horse-flesh. It didn't fit with the image he wanted for her. "Now let's see if you can saddle him by yourself."

"No problem," Victoria said.

"It's SO BEAUTIFUL here," Victoria said almost reverently. "Lindsay's always said you had to see the Canyon de Chelly to believe it," she said. "It's magnificent. The colors, the trees, the smell." Her arm swept out

in a wide arc. "Everything. Pictures just don't do it justice." Saddle leather creaked as she twisted around to look at John. The excited smile of a child curved her glossy lips. "How soon do we get to one of those famous ruins?"

John couldn't help but respond to her eagerness with a smile of his own. "Another five minutes at most if we—"

"Get a move on," Victoria finished for him.

She pulled her mount up sharply when the first of the Anasazi ruins came into view. The crumbling remains of a culture long dead held her silent for a moment, awestruck that an ancient people could build a whole village on the seemingly inaccessible ledges of the canyon walls. "It's incredible, isn't it?" she said. "And sad, too. I wonder what happened to them?"

"Drought seems the most likely answer."

"Tell me about the canyon," Victoria said as they guided the horses into the center of a wide, shallow stream. "The canyon as it is today, I mean. What crops grow here besides corn?"

"Squash and beans, mostly. Pumpkin." He gestured at a tree. "Peaches." A big six-wheel sightseeing vehicle lumbered into view, heading for the ruins. "Tourists," he said.

"You don't like having them here, do you?" she said, sensing something beneath his easy words.

He shrugged. "It's not a question of liking or disliking. Tourists are necessary to the economy of the canyon. They're a fact of life," he said.

"Well, I wouldn't like them here if this were my home."

John grinned at her tone. *Spoiled little twit*, he thought again. "The canyon isn't exactly my home."

"You don't live here?"

"Uh-uh. I visit. Have done every summer since I was six."

"Is that when you were sent away to boarding school?" she asked.

"No." John shook his head. "That was when my parents got divorced and my mother moved us to Flagstaff."

"You grew up in Flagstaff?" Victoria peered at him. Divorced parents. Flagstaff. He wasn't all Navajo. "Your mother isn't Indian," she surmised.

"Italian mostly. With a little Swiss mixed in."

"Ha! I knew it!" Victoria crowed. "No Indian alive ever had goldy green eyes like yours."

"Goldy green?" he repeated. He hadn't thought she'd looked at him long enough to notice.

"John. Hey, John." A young Indian boy, about seven years old, hailed them from a stand of cottonwoods.

"Hey, Ricky!" John hollered back. "What's up?"

"Grandmother sent me to look and see if you were comin' yet." He loped toward them. "She said I could be the sentry. Christina, too," he added,

speaking of his younger sister. "But I'm the *head* sentry. I sent her back to tell Grandmother you were coming as soon as I saw you."

The child scrambled up, balancing easily on the horse's rump, his arms around John's neck.

"Grandmother said to tell you she made tea for the 'partment store lady." He looked over at Victoria, whose smile widened.

She extended her hand. "My name's Victoria Dillon. What's yours?"

The boy hesitated, but John nudged him. "Richard Redcloud," he said, his hand darting out to shake hers. "Grandmother's made some corn cakes for you, too," he told her. "With honey and pinyon nuts. But we can't have any till you get there."

"Then you'd better sit down so we can—" John began.

"Get a move on," Victoria finished.

"That's three," John said.

"Three!" Ricky shrieked. "You have to run," he told Victoria.

"Ricky, sit down," John ordered, reaching behind him to pull the child down.

"But she has to run!"

"Why?" Victoria said.

"Because if you get three, he tickles you," Ricky said.

Victoria set her heels into Rover's sides and ran.

She heard Ricky's excited shriek, a muffled shout from John, and then the furious splashing of hooves through water as he came after her. His horse

was faster, but she had a slight head start.

The splashing behind her got louder.

She whooped wildly, the thrill of the chase tingling along her spine.

"We're catching her, John!" Ricky shouted.

Victoria turned her head slightly, to check his position. He was closing in on her.

"Come on, Rover. Come—"

One minute she was in the saddle, the next she hit the ground, and everything went black.

*

"OPEN YOUR EYES, Victoria," a voice demanded.

She struggled to obey. Her ebony lashes fluttered open, revealed only a blur and drifted closed again. Something cold and damp wiped across her forehead. Victoria opened her eyes.

Above her, a face floated into focus. It was a woman's face that had been carved by time. Black eyes, wise, inquisitive, stared down at her.

"Awake now?" the woman said in accented English.

"Yes...yes, I'm awake. I think." Victoria lifted a hand to her head. "What happened?"

"Your horse stumbled and threw you." The deep, musical voice came from outside her line of vision.

Victoria turned toward it. John. His Greek-god face wore a frown instead of a smirk, and his eyes were serious.

"Grandmother wants you to lie still

and let her make sure you haven't broken anything."

"I'm sure I haven't," Victoria began, but Maria Redcloud's weathered old hands were already running over her body.

"Okay," Maria said. She sat back on her heels. "You stay," she ordered Victoria sternly, then turned to the others behind her. A quick instruction sent a wide-eyed little girl racing across the clearing. Another had John and Ricky backing out of the open shelter where Victoria lay.

"Grandmother wants to get you out of those wet clothes," he said. "And she doesn't want us to watch. Come on, Ricky. Let's go see if we can round up the horses," John said, turning away as the girl returned and handed Maria some dry garments.

With a deft maneuver, Maria dropped a faded red calico tunic over Victoria's head, then pulled the white blouse off her shoulders beneath it. She handed the damp garment to the waiting child to drape across the branches of a nearby bush.

After divesting her of her wet sneakers, Maria stood and helped Victoria to her feet. The calico tunic fell almost to mid thigh. Victoria took off her jeans, too, stepping into a wide cotton skirt.

"All," Maria said, motioning toward her hips, and the girl took the tiny scrap of lace and hung it up to dry with the rest of the clothes.

"Thank you...Christina, isn't it?" Victoria said, sinking back down on the sheepskins she'd been lying on.

She felt much better sitting down, and took in the scene before her. It was as if a picture in a history book had come to life: the open-sided structure made of four upright poles and a leafy, latticed top that sheltered her from the sun, the upright loom, the six-sided hogan across the small clearing, the old Indian woman leaning over the camp stove.

Maria wore the same sort of clothing Navajo women had worn since the early 1860s. A deep green velveteen tunic, long-sleeved and high-collared, was tucked into a full, ankle-length calico skirt. A lavish silver-and-turquoise-embellished concha belt cinched her waist. A many-stranded necklace of turquoise beads hung around her neck, along with a delicate silver-and-turquoise cross. Her heavy gray hair was smoothed back into a traditional knot. And on her feet—

Victoria blinked. Yes, on her feet Maria Redcloud wore black Converse high-tops. But the Navajo were known for adapting the ways of other cultures to the needs of their own.

"Take," Maria said then, thrusting an enameled tin cup under Victoria's nose.

The scent of herbal tea wafted up. "Thank you." She took a cautious sip. Hot but not too hot. Liquid comfort. "Thank you," she said again, smiling. "It's just what I needed."

"The horses are all taken care of, Grandmother," Ricky said as he came running up ahead of John. "Can we have our corn cakes now?"

In answer, Maria opened a covered

basket and took out what looked like two large, thick sugar cookies. She handed them to Ricky with a few quick words.

"Aw, Grandmother—" Ricky began.

"Don't argue, Ricky," John admonished. "Grandmother wants to talk to her guest alone. So give Christina her corn cake and take off."

Ricky stood there for a moment.

"There was a load of tourists at the ruins when we rode by," John said. "Maybe one of them will give you a quarter to pose for a photo."

Both children squealed and scampered off as John stood watching, a fond smile on his face. Then he crouched in front of Victoria.

"How're you feeling?" he said softly.

"Fine."

"No headache or blurred vision?"

She shook her head.

"Dizziness?"

"A little at first, but only for a minute. And it's gone now," she said, looking at him over the rim of her cup. She held it out. "May I have some more tea?"

"Any more tea, Grandmother?" John rose.

Maria nodded. "Just half," she said to him in Navajo. "Too much will make her sleepy. It has a mild sedative in it."

John looked over at Victoria. She gave him a sweet, dreamy smile. "I think she's already had too much."

VICTORIA AWOKE to the muted music of the breeze rustling through the leafy roof above her head and a soft, scraping sound that she couldn't quite place.

It was Christina. She sat cross-legged in a corner, head bent, attention focused on the fluffy bundle in her lap. Victoria propped herself up on an elbow, fascinated to realize that the child was carding wool.

"Hello," Victoria said softly.

Christina looked up. A friendly smile curved her lips. "Oh, you're awake. I'll go get Grandmother."

Victoria stretched, arching her back. She felt so good, so...euphoric almost. She didn't even have a twinge of the aches that should have rewarded her carelessness on Rover. She wondered how long she'd been asleep—and where John was.

She'd dreamed about him, she remembered suddenly, as images of their entwined bodies filled her waking mind. Scandalous dreams that made her fantasy of heated, frantic lovemaking in the cab of his truck pale by comparison.

Had he really left her here, all alone?

It seemed so, for there was Maria, walking toward the shelter with Christina.

"Better?" Maria asked.

"Yes. I'm fine," Victoria said.

"I look," Maria said, obviously not trusting her patient's judgment. She bent over and peered into Victoria's eyes as if she were trying to see into

her soul. "Okay," Maria said. "Hungry now?"

"Yes, I am. Ravenous," she said, meaning it. "But I'd like to use the bathroom first."

Maria gestured to Christina.

"I'll show you where it is," the child said, reaching for Victoria's hand. They started down a well-worn path that led away from the family's living quarters.

"There," the child said, pointing toward a small outhouse.

Victoria entered it cautiously. The inside was scrupulously clean, and the chemical toilet had a flush mechanism. Victoria used it quickly and emerged.

"You can wash here," said Christina, motioning toward a large earthenware jug suspended from a metal bracket on the outhouse. A wide shallow bowl sat on a wooden shelf beneath it, a bar of soap beside it.

When Victoria had finished, Christina took her hand with the air of an adult about to lead a child across a busy street. "Now we go back to the ramada."

"Wait a minute," Victoria said. "My skirt's too long," she explained, bending down to lift the hem. Giving it a couple of twists to gather in the material, she tucked it into the waistband.

That was how John saw her—being dragged up the path from the outhouse by Christina, her raven hair in a bewitching tangle, her skirt tucked up around those tantalizing legs, her bare feet dusty. At first glance, she could

have been mistaken for an Indian herself, if a slightly untidy one.

But a second, closer glance revealed her for what she was. The smooth, manicured hands, the gleaming red nails, the aristocratic elegance and air of pampered wealth. Most certainly not for him.

He didn't want her, John told himself, in any way that really mattered. But, Lord, he'd love to have her in every other way!

He'd sat there, watching her while she slept, and *ached* to lie down beside her. If they'd been alone, he might have done just that.

"Ricky! Ricky!" Christina called then. "Guess what! I'm going to have my rugs in a store!" She released Victoria's hand to run ahead.

John pulled himself up sharply. Fantasizing again, he thought, disgusted. He'd been doing too much of that—ever since pulling up behind that flashy little Mercedes. He vowed to stop it.

"You look fully recovered," he said.

"I'm fine, thank you," Victoria said, willing herself not to smooth her hair. She just knew it was a rat's nest of tangles.

"I'm glad you're back," she said to John as she walked into the shade of the ramada. "I need someone to interpret. For your grandmother and me. Mrs. Redcloud," she said, coming up behind the woman at the camp stove. "I'd like to thank you for your kindness and find out when we can discuss our business. I—"

Her words were cut off as Maria turned and thrust a plate of lamb stew into her hands. "Eat first," she said. "Talk after."

"Need me to interpret that for you?" John asked.

Victoria ignored him. *Smart ass*, she thought, and followed her hostess. John watched her with a smirk on his face, waiting for her to attempt the cross-legged position with a full plate in her hand. But she made it look easy, sinking gracefully to the ground between Maria and Christina. The skirt puffed out around her. It covered her right leg completely, but the other leg, where her skirt was tucked into the waistband, was bare nearly to the top of her thigh.

Luscious thigh, he thought, scooping up a bite of stew with a tortilla.

He looked up into her face. Their eyes locked. Hot amber burned into bittersweet chocolate, a tangle of warring emotions sizzling between them. Speculation. Desire. Denial. They both looked away.

"I have decided that I must know this Victoria Dillon better," Maria said in Navajo. "I must know her soul before I can entrust her with my rugs."

John's head snapped up. "Why? You never wanted to know her sister-in-law's soul."

"I could see what kind of woman she was." She looked over at Victoria. "I cannot see this one so clearly."

"What's she saying?" Victoria asked. She could tell that the conversation was about her, and that John

didn't like whatever Maria was saying.

John waved her to silence. "What difference does it make?"

"I must know if she will treat my rugs with the reverence they require."

"Reverence?" His grandmother was up to something. *Reverence, my ass*, he thought.

"What's going on?" Victoria said again.

"Grandmother wants to know your soul."

"My soul?" Her glance flickered back and forth between the two of them. "Please tell her I don't understand. I'll be happy to tell her what I can, of course, but..." She shrugged. "I'm not sure what she wants from me."

"Grandmother?" John said.

"Tell her I wish to know nothing specifically. But I would like her to stay in the canyon as my guest, for a day or two so that I may know her. Perhaps even a week."

"A week!" John said in English. A week of looking at Victoria would turn him into a raving maniac.

"A week?" Victoria echoed. "A week what?"

"She wants you to stay here for a few days while she gets to know you."

"Stay...?" Victoria wasn't on a schedule, and she was stuck here, anyway, until her car was fixed. "I guess I could extend my reservations at the lodge," she said hesitantly. "I'd have to call home but—"

"Not at the lodge," John said. "Here."

"Here?" Her eyes widened. "You mean right here? In the canyon?" That put a whole different slant on things.

Ignoring John and his gorgeous body would be impossible in the confines of the Redcloud hogan. "Wouldn't it be kind of crowded?" she asked finally.

"Damned crowded," agreed John. He didn't live in Maria's hogan, as Victoria obviously thought. He had a small one of his own that he used when he stayed overnight in the canyon. But it would still be crowded.

"Well, then...?"

"You see the problem, Grandmother?" he said in English.

"She can have a tent of her own. From the lodge. You can put it up for her," Maria said in Navajo. "I do not think she can do it for herself."

"Grandmother suggests that you should have your own tent during your visit. The lodge rents them." He paused. "Or I could bring my camping gear from home."

Yes, that's right, she thought then, relief storming through her. He'd told her earlier that the canyon wasn't his home. That he only visited. He probably wouldn't be here at all while Maria was "getting to know her soul." She could handle an occasional meeting with him, she told herself. So long as he kept his shirt on...

She turned and looked directly at Maria. "I'd love to stay," she said.

"For as long as you'd like to have me."

*

THERE WERE ONLY women in Maria Redcloud's ramada as Victoria approached it next morning. Maria, her granddaughter Nina, who was visiting, and her great-granddaughter, Christina. Only seven o'clock, Victoria marveled, and already they were busy. Maria sat at her loom, stringing it for a new weaving. Christina was carding wool. Nina sat cross-legged, plying a needle through the mound of white fabric in her lap.

"Good morning," Victoria called.

Nina and Christina looked up and smiled. Maria nodded. "Good morning," Nina greeted her. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a baby," Victoria lied. She'd spent the first night in her tent fighting dreams of John. "Am I too late for coffee?"

"I will get it for you," Christina offered.

"No, stay where you are. I can get it." Victoria set the borrowed skirt and tunic she was carrying on top of a large covered basket. "One of these cups okay?"

Nina nodded. "There is sugar and powdered creamer there—" she pointed—"if you want them."

"Black is fine," Victoria said, pouring a cup. She came over to sink cross-legged onto the sheepskin next to Nina. "Is that suede you're working on?" she asked.

"Yes." Nina held it up. It was a white tunic with a long fringe on the hem. Embossed silver, coinlike buttons decorated the long sleeves and outlined the split collar. An intricate pattern in tiny blue and coral beads would cover three-fourths of the bodice.

"Oh, how beautiful!" Victoria gasped.

"My wedding dress," Nina said proudly. "I am to be married next week."

"Congratulations," Victoria said warmly. "Or is it good luck one wishes the bride?" She smiled at Nina over her coffee cup, recalling that she had seen her extend her hand to her mother and grandmother last night after greeting them. Showing off her engagement ring, of course.

"Your ring—" Victoria nodded—"may I see it?"

Nina held out her hand. The ring featured a highly polished, intensely blue turquoise at its center, surrounded by diamond chips.

"It's exquisite."

"Thank you," Nina said proudly. "My fiancé made it especially for me. It is one of a kind."

Maria Redcloud spoke to her granddaughter.

"Yes, Grandmother. I'm sorry," Nina said in Navajo. She turned to Victoria. "I haven't offered you any breakfast. I can prepare you—"

"No, nothing," Victoria interrupted her. "Coffee is enough. I never eat in the morning."

Maria spoke again, a rapid string of

Navajo, scolding in tone. Nina replied in the same language.

"Humph," Maria said.

Nina laughed. "Grandmother says you are too thin," she told Victoria. "I said it is the fashion to be thin. You can see her response."

Victoria smiled and put her empty cup aside. "What can I do to help?"

Maria spoke again.

"Grandmother suggests that you might like to help Christina card her wool," Nina said.

"Oh, yes, I'd love to," Victoria scooted across the sheepskin rug. "If Christina would show me how."

Christina transferred the wooden cards to Victoria's lap and patiently showed her the motion to make. Victoria flubbed it; Christina laughed and showed her again, until she was finally doing a credible, if painfully slow, job of carding the wool.

"In a little time," Nina said approvingly, "you will be nearly as good as Christina."

They whiled away the morning that way, talking and sewing. Victoria learned that the rest of the Redcloud family had risen with the sun. Nina's mother, Dolores, her sister, Rose, and her brother-in-law, Luis, all worked at the lodge. Her father, Matt, was off on council business. John and Dan and Ricky were mending a fence. Victoria heard about Nina's fiancé, Bob, who was a teacher like herself, as well as being a skilled silversmith.

"I don't know when I've enjoyed myself more," she said when Nina set

her beadwork aside to start preparations for the noon meal.

"But you must have many good times," Nina said.

"Yes," Victoria agreed. "But not like this." She spread her arms wide. "The canyon is so beautiful. So peaceful. And the company so congenial. It's like a better world, maybe."

"You sound like John," Nina said. "Every summer when we Navajo move back into the canyon, he says the same thing."

Victoria got to her feet. "Don't you live here all year?"

"No, only in summer. It gets too cold here in winter. And the children must go to school."

"So where do you live?"

"In Chinle. At least, most of us do." Nina poured oil from a large can into the skillet, then lifted the lid of a large ice chest. "As John did until four years ago. He has a ranch outside of Chinle now." Chunks of chicken sizzled in the pan. "He is building a fine herd of horses. They are his first love. More than his precious computers, even."

Maria commented then.

"Yes, Grandmother," Nina agreed in English. "Horses are much better. We Navajo," she said to Victoria, "have historically counted our wealth in sheep and horses. Grandmother is slow to give up the old ways."

AFTER THE FAMILY had assembled for a lunch of fresh corn tortillas, sliced

garden tomatoes and fried rabbit—which tasted a lot like the chicken Victoria had thought it was—it was time to wash up.

And then she broke a nail. Reaching into the soapy bucket of water for a plate, she snapped the nail off all the way to the quick. The plate clattered to the ground and Victoria clutched the wounded fingertip, trying not to howl at the sharp, stinging pain.

“What is it, Victoria?” Nina asked, alarmed. “Did you cut yourself?”

“No, no.” Victoria waved her finger in the air as if to cool it. “It’s nothing.”

John looked up from the leather strap he was repairing.

“Let me see,” Nina said. “How bad is it?”

“Grandmother!” Christina hollered. “Victoria has cut herself.”

John rose to his feet and assisted Maria to hers as he headed toward the commotion.

“It’s nothing really,” Victoria insisted. “I didn’t cut myself. It’s just...a broken nail,” she finished sheepishly, feeling like a prize fool.

The nail on the index finger of her right hand was gone, torn off just below the quick, among four long, perfectly manicured red ones.

“All that noise for a broken fingernail?” Maria said in Navajo, slanting a pleased glance up at her grandson to see if he had seen how silly the Anglo woman was acting. He had.

“Looks like you’ll live,” he said dryly.

Nina was more sympathetic.

“Here.” She handed Victoria the dishtowel. “You dry. It will probably sting if you put it in the water.”

SHE BROKE the second nail pulling weeds in the garden. It wasn’t a painful break this time, just annoying. Her manicurist was going to have a fit when she finally got back to Phoenix.

At this point it was anybody’s guess as to when that might be. Maria had steadfastly refused to discuss the sale of her rugs, claiming, when Victoria had tried to talk to her through Nina, that she still did not properly know her soul. And then she had sent her off with Christina to be shown how to weed a garden.

That evening after dinner, when the members of the Redcloud clan had retired to their respective hogans, Victoria sat alone just inside the open flap of her tent with a pair of nail clippers, calmly cutting the rest of her nails. She’d already taken off the red polish. When she got them all filed smooth, they’d be fine. Not glamorous, but serviceable, which she’d begun to think was better.

She had never known such tranquillity, she thought, sighing as she filed. Never had such a sense of satisfaction from a day’s work. Which might be because she’d never *done* a day’s work before. Not really.

As the beloved only daughter of Emily and Thomas Cullen of Cullen’s Department Store and the cherished baby sister of Conrad Cullen, she’d found life had always been effortless

and easy. Friends had been easy; both sexes seemed to seek her out. Love and marriage had been easy; she'd met Brad Dillon during her junior year in college, become engaged in her senior year and married him in the wedding of the Phoenix social season after graduation. Even the divorce had been easy.

And none of it had given her the same sense of satisfaction that she'd gained today. The only thing that would have made it more wonderful was someone to share it with. Someone like John.

She hadn't seen him since the embarrassing incident of the broken nail. He had not even returned for dinner.

"John and Dan have gone into Chinle for more fence wire," Nina had said, explaining their absence.

Victoria had spent the evening wondering if it took all day and half the night to buy fence wire. She wondered, too, if he were avoiding her.

"You're looking very pleased with yourself," John said, making her jump.

Well, speak of the devil, she thought, looking up to find him standing just outside the tied-back flap of the tent.

"Where'd you come from?" she said, trying to sound cool and unruffled.

"Chinle." He tried not to look at her bare knees. Her bare shoulders. The little lace ruffle that adorned the sleeveless bodice of her white nightgown. "I saw your light when I came down the path," he said a little defen-

sively, "so I thought I'd deliver a message from Willie Salt."

"Oh, yes. My car." She stopped filing as a terrible thought occurred to her. "Is it fixed?"

"Yeah," John said, wondering why she was looking at him like that—as if he'd just taken away her favorite doll. "You can pick it up tomorrow. I thought you'd be pleased."

"Well, I am...I guess. I mean, I'm glad the car's fixed. But—" She brightened. "I can't get it tomorrow. Your grandmother and I haven't come to an agreement on her rugs yet."

"Grandmother will come to an agreement fast enough if she knows you're set on leaving."

"But I'm not! I mean— She wants to 'learn my soul,' doesn't she?"

John snorted. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"Well, yes, I do. Why else would she want me here?"

"Why else, indeed?" he said dryly, turning to leave.

Victoria jumped up. "Hey, wait a minute." She stepped outside the tent, heedless of her bare feet. "You can't say something like that and then walk away."

He looked down at her hand on his arm. "I think it would be better if I did," he said.

"Well, I don't! I want to know what you meant."

"You do, do you?" he responded. *What the hell,* he thought. *Tell her.* It would give her something to think about besides herself. "My grand-

mother," he said, "wants you here to prove to me that you're no good."

"What?" She bristled. "What do you mean?"

"No good for me," he elaborated. And, unable to resist, he caught her chin between his thumb and finger. "It's very simple, really," he said, staring down into her eyes. "My grandmother knows I'm attracted to you. The good Lord only knows how, but she does. And she knows what happened the last time I was attracted to a woman like you."

"A woman like me?" Victoria whispered.

"A city woman. A pampered Anglo woman." He shook his head. "Grandmother thought a little reminder of how unsuitable a woman like you is to this life—my life—was in order. So she decided to keep you around for a few days to show me just how poorly a woman like you fits in."

"Stop saying 'a woman like you'!" Victoria said. "I'm an individual. So don't try to shove me into some pigeonhole, because I won't fit."

"No," he agreed softly, fighting the need to take her in his arms and kiss away her frown. "My ex-wife—an Anglo—didn't fit into my life at all." He was quiet for a moment. "Nina said that you enjoyed yourself today, that you actually seemed to get a kick out of weeding the garden."

"I did," Victoria assured him, touched by his honesty. "I liked it a lot."

"It doesn't change anything." He ran the back of his finger wistfully

down her cheek. "I still can't have you."

Something stilled in Victoria's chest. Her heart, she thought. And her lungs. All the vital functions ceased for one incredible second. And then they started up again. Beating harder, taking in more air than ever before. "*I still can't have you*," he'd said.

But he could. Oh, he could!

"John, I..." she began.

"No, don't say it," he cautioned. "I know you want me, too. But it wouldn't work. We're too dif—"

"No, that's not it at all! Well, it is, partly. But—"

He put his finger over her lips. "No," he said. "Just go back inside your tent. I told Willie I'd get you over there tomorrow afternoon to pick up your car," he said gruffly. "Forget we ever had this conversation."

Victoria went, but there was no way she was going to forget. Forget the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to her? Not likely. One little no wasn't enough to discourage Victoria Dillon when she finally knew what it was she wanted in life.

"Just you wait, John Redcloud." She smiled to herself. "Tomorrow you won't know what hit you."

WELL, thought Victoria, *alone at last in the front seat of John Redcloud's blue pickup truck with only his hat on the seat between us*. She looked over at him, half hoping that he'd make her fantasy come true. More than hoping. Wanting. Desperately.

"What?" he asked, feeling her stare.

Victoria forced her eyes forward. "Nothing," she said, a small, secret smile curving her lips.

He could sense the feelings radiating from her like heat waves in the desert. The same feelings that sizzled through him. *Lust*, he reminded himself. *Just lust*.

He should have brought Christina along, he thought then, shaking his head to dislodge the image of their two bodies locked together in heated abandon. A child sitting on the seat between them would have kept these feelings, these fantasies, at bay.

Thank God the service station was only a few miles on. He could drop her off, be rid of the temptation to ravage her for the rest of the afternoon.

The garage was closed. And Victoria's flashy little car was locked inside for safekeeping. A young teenager was tending the gas pumps.

"Willie had some kinda emergency," he informed them. "I don't know where he keeps the key to the garage or when he'll be back. He didn't say."

"Damn it all," John swore. "Now I'll have to take you back to the canyon before I can go out to my place."

"Your place? The ranch Nina told me about?"

"Yeah, I need to go out and check on a few things. I was going to drop you off, let you drive back to the lodge."

"I'd rather go out to your place with you," she said.

"My place?" Not a good idea. "What the hell for?"

"I'd like to see it. Nina said you raised horses."

"Yeah. So?"

"Well," Victoria shrugged. "Is there some good reason I shouldn't see your ranch?"

He could think of a dozen good reasons, all of them about...this *feeling* they had for each other. "No, I guess not. Okay, we'll go out to the ranch."

THE HOUSE WAS low and rambling—typical of the southwestern United States. The outside was native stone and timber with a wide, rough-hewn plank deck and a double carport with a big yellow van parked under it. This must be John's "traveling classroom." Nina had told her that he taught computer literacy at three schools on the reservation this way. A hay barn, horse barn and neat network of corrals were spread out behind the house.

Victoria was delighted. "This is wonderful, John," she said, slipping out of the truck. "Can I see the horses? The house?"

"There's the house," he said. "The horses are down this way."

"I meant the inside."

"What do you want to see inside the house for?" he asked. He didn't want her in the house! If he saw her standing in his house—there wouldn't be any corner of his life left that he didn't associate with fantasies of her.

"Well, it's usually considered po-

lite to invite a person inside your house."

"In the Anglo world, maybe."

"Oh," she said softly.

Damn! Now she looked as if he'd stolen her doll again. "Look, if you want to see inside, it's fine with me," he said. "What'll it be? Horses first, or the house?"

"Horses," she said, sensing that would please him.

"That's my latest acquisition," he said, pointing her toward a corral set off by itself. A dappled gray yearling colt trotted up to the fence. "This is Hi," he said, reaching out to scratch the young stallion's velvety muzzle. "Yahiya ibn Abdu," he added. "He's going to sire a lot of prizewinners when he's a little older."

"Why, he looks just like Ali," Victoria said, climbing up on the lowest rung for a better look. "Ali's a little darker now." She studied the animal. "Did you say his name was Yahiya ibn Abdu?"

John nodded.

"Sired by Morgan Breckle's Royal Abdu from Las Vegas, right?"

"Yeah," he said slowly, respect showing in his eyes. She knew a lot about horses!

"So was Ali!" she said with a pleased smile. Another link had been forged between them. "Out of Fatima." She patted the colt. "Who was his dam?"

"One of my own mares. Gray Pigeon."

"Well, he's beautiful." She sighed.

"Your whole herd is beautiful. Can I see the barn now?"

"I thought you wanted to see the house," he said quickly. If he took her into the barn now, he'd be all too tempted to take her, period. And he wasn't going to do that. She wasn't the woman for him, not by a long shot. "Just keep telling yourself that, Redcloud," he muttered.

"I'm sorry?" Victoria said. "What did you say?"

"One of the mares in there is only a couple of weeks away from foaling," he said. "Strangers make her nervous. Let's go up to the house."

"Fine," said Victoria.

They walked across the planked deck silently, both of them caught up in their own feelings, poised on the edge of something they couldn't define. This was a turning point and they both knew it.

The brass knob turned under his hand, the heavy oak door opening inward. Almost holding her breath, Victoria stepped onto the large Mexican tiles of the entryway.

The first thing she noticed was the coolness, the kind of coolness that came from an air conditioner. That was definitely Anglo. The next was the magnificent rendering of a sand-painting on one whole wall of the living room. Definitely Navajo.

"That's from the Blessing Way ceremony," he said. "It's meant to ensure good luck or to celebrate a happy event. Nina and Bob will have Bless-

ing Way songs at their wedding, 'for good hope.'"

"It's beautiful." She took a closer look. "Did you paint it?"

"My father did. He was in training to be a Singer. But he gave it up after the divorce."

"Singer?" Victoria said over her shoulder.

"What you Anglos would call a medicine man."

"Does he live here with you?"

"He died six years ago. Cirrhosis of the liver."

Victoria turned from the painting. "Oh, John. I'm sorry." Those few words explained a lot. His wariness of her was more than just an Anglo wife who couldn't accept his life. His father's marriage to an Anglo hadn't worked out, either.

"It'd been a long time coming. He was ready," John said. "Would you like to see the rest of the house?" The subject was closed.

"Yes, please. Is that the kitchen?" She walked to a door.

It was. The room was sparsely but pleasantly decorated with a few pieces of Indian pottery, furnished simply with a long trestle-style table and modern electrical appliances. It would take only a few feminine touches to make it really homey.

"What's through there?" she asked, eager to see the rest of it. She was learning a lot about John from his house. He was tidy. He had a good sense of color and design. And he was lonely. He didn't really live in this house, he just occupied it.

"Just the bedrooms and my office. Nothing that would interest you."

"But they do," Victoria said. "Can I look?"

He shrugged. "Be my guest."

The first room was his office. Filled bookcases lined two walls. Most of the center of the room was occupied by a large desk-height table with two computer terminals, two printers and several stacks of computer paper, technical journals and school textbooks.

"Looks like control central," Victoria said lightly.

The next two rooms were presumably meant to be bedrooms; they were empty. The last room was his. A king-size bed set against the longest wall was covered with a spectacular Navajo blanket. A natural-stone fireplace occupied the entire north wall. Sliding glass doors draped with loosely woven fabric led out to the deck. A chest of drawers stood opposite. And that was it.

During the drive he'd told her that he'd built this house, or had it built, for the Anglo wife who hadn't wanted it. *Stupid, stupid woman*, Victoria thought.

But *she* was going to live here with him. *She* was going to be the woman to banish the loneliness and fill this house with warmth and laughter and love and the children so obviously intended for those empty bedrooms. She turned to tell him so and found him standing right behind her.

"It's a beautiful home, John," she

said, looking up at him with her heart in her eyes.

"I'm glad you like it."

She put her hand on his chest. "I like it very much."

His heart started to thud. "Victoria." Somehow his hands were on her shoulders. "Victoria."

"Yes?"

He groaned and pulled her to him. "Damn," he said softly, lowering his mouth to hers. "I promised myself I wouldn't do this."

*

VICTORIA MOANED in helpless delight and melted against him. Her arms tightened around his neck, pulling him closer. Her lips closed around his tongue, sucking. Her fragrance surrounded him.

Night-blooming flowers and forbidden sex; the thought broke through his frenzied rapture. Only she wasn't forbidden now. She was his. Every hot, silky, responsive inch of her, yearning for him as passionately as he yearned for her.

He slid his hand up her side and ran the heel of it over the swell of her breast.

"Yes." She sighed into his mouth, as he slid his hand inward to cover her breast. It was as soft, as sweet, as delicate as he had known it would be. The nipple was a hard little pebble, pressing against the sensitive center of his palm through her clothes.

"Victoria." His voice was a whis-

per of wood smoke. "Victoria, let me undress you."

"Oh, yes." Her hands fell to her belt. "Yes. I want to be naked with you."

"Let *me* undress you," he said, brushing her eager hands away. "I've dreamed of this," he said softly, unbuckling her belt. "Daydreams, night dreams. Every time I looked at you I wanted to do this." He lowered the zipper.

Victoria's throat worked. Her eyes closed.

"From that first day, when your skirt came up— Remember?"

Victoria nodded.

"And I got that tantalizing little glimpse of that scrap of lace you call *underpants*—" He slid his hands inside the parted cloth. Lace brushed his palms as he pushed her baggy shorts away. They fell, unimpeded, down the long silky length of her legs, and he cupped her heels to pull off her tennis shoes as she lifted each foot out of the shorts.

The honey-colored stretch-lace teddy she was wearing under her discarded T-shirt fitted her like a second skin. He could see the outline of her nipples and the soft black shadow of the hair between her thighs.

"Lord, Victoria," he groaned, reaching for her again. "Why do you even bother?" His mouth covered hers before she could answer.

He bent without removing his mouth from hers and lifted her in his arms, making his way over to the bed. He lowered her to the striped blanket.

Their mouths finally separated then as he drew back and looked down at her.

She looked so damned *right*, he thought almost despairingly, lying there on his bed with her silky ebony hair spread out against the deep blues and greens of the blanket his grandmother had made for him. If he forgot about where she came from, it would be easy to believe that she was Indian herself—that she could belong here.

She smiled up at him softly, sweetly. “What is it?” she whispered, raising her hand to touch his cheek. “Why have you stopped?”

He turned his lips into her palm. “I haven’t stopped,” he told her. “I was just taking a minute to look.”

Her smile deepened. “I’d like to look, too.”

“You would, would you?”

“Mm-hmm.” Her hand slipped inside the collar of his shirt, to the first pearl-headed snap. A gentle tug had it open. The small charm around his neck swung forward on its short leather thong. “I’ve had a few fantasies of my own about what you look like under your clothes, too.” She tugged the second snap open, then came upright on the bed, and knelt in front of him to finish unsnapping his shirt. “That very first day, when you stopped to help me and came strutting up to my car—”

“Strutting!”

“With your shirt hanging open and your chest all hard and gleaming with sweat. I kept hoping you’d take your shirt off so I could get a better look at all that virile beauty.”

“Well, now,” he drawled. “Is that any way for a little lady to talk?”

Victoria gave him a playful, narrowed-eyed glare. “That’s the way this little lady talks,” she informed him. “And I didn’t want to just look. I wanted to touch you, too...rub my hands all over your chest to see if all those gorgeous muscles were as hard as they looked.” She smoothed her palms over him. “They are.”

“There’s another part of my anatomy that’s pretty hard right now,” he said.

“Yeah?” Head tilted, she gave him a flirtatious, seductive look. “Would it help if I rubbed it, too?”

“Victoria!” He pressed a hand over her teasing fingers, flattening them against his stomach before they could curl around his hardness.

“John!” she said back, then giggled. “I’d never have thought you’d turn out to be such a prude.”

“Prude?” he said, and stood. “I’ll show you prude, little lady.” He dropped his shirt to the floor and reached for the buckle on his belt.

“Take it off,” sang Victoria. “Take it all off.”

John stopped undressing, his hands on the waistband of his jeans. “This isn’t the way you acted in my fantasies,” he accused.

“No?” She came up on her knees and wrapped her arms around his lean hips. She pressed her cheek to his stomach, her chest to his hips. “Is this better?” she whispered fiercely.

“It’ll—” John cleared his throat.

“It’ll do for a start.”

She lifted her head. Their eyes met and held for an endless second, all teasing gone.

"Victoria," John said, sinking onto the bed with her in his arms. He touched her face with wondering fingertips, buried his lips against the pulse above her collarbone, his hand skimming down to cup her breast.

Victoria moaned softly, and reached out to touch him in turn. *So smooth*, she thought, caressing him as he caressed her. *So warm. So wonderful.* Was any other man so perfectly made in both body and spirit?

She felt languid, all liquid and warm, as they lay there together in the quiet room; then John was looming over her, naked, his big hands tugging at the lace straps on her shoulders. Victoria lifted her body, assisting him as he peeled her out of the teddy.

Her body was more perfect than any fantasy could possibly be. It hadn't occurred to him that the honey gold color of her silky skin owed nothing to the kiss of the sun. He hadn't realized that the tangle of black curls at the apex of her thighs would be the softest thing he had ever touched. He reached down to cup that feminine delta.

They both sighed.

And then his fingers began to move, seeking even softer, creamier flesh, gently stroking the little nub hidden there, and Victoria's sighs turned to moans. Then to whimpers. And finally, to a muffled scream of fulfillment. Almost before she had her

breath back, he was moving over her, positioning himself for entry.

"Victoria," he moaned, sinking into her warm, welcoming moistness.

As if she knew exactly what he wanted, she lifted her legs and locked her ankles behind his hips. Matching him thrust for thrust, breath for ragged breath, she held his strong, trembling body in her arms and poured out her love.

"Oh, John," she moaned when her second climax took her. "John, my love." She sighed when passion finally claimed him, driving his body into hers with one last mighty thrust.

JOHN HAD HEARD her whispered endearment; just as he had heard every moan and sigh and soft murmur she had uttered before that. He told himself that it was only a word spoken in the throes of passion. So how could she have meant it? The terrifying thing was that he wanted her to mean it.

"John?" Victoria's soft voice broke into his thoughts. Her hand stroked gently through the damp hair on his forehead. "John, have you fallen asleep on me?"

He raised his head. "Would I be that impolite?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Probably," she said, smiling back. "But I wouldn't mind. I just thought maybe you could shift over a tad."

He levered himself off her, cradling her in one arm. "Better?"

She snuggled into his shoulder and

put her hand on his chest. "Perfect," she said. But she lied.

Oh, physically everything was perfect. It had never been more perfect. But where were the words of love? Or the endearments, at least, if he wasn't ready to say the big *L* word yet?

"You have the softest, silkiest skin," he said then, "and you smell so damned sexy."

Victoria's heart turned over, her touch of postcoital sadness disappearing.

"What do you call that perfume you wear?"

"It's called Victoria. I have it specially blended."

"That figures," he snorted, smiling up at her lazily. "What's in it?"

"Tuberose and musk. With a touch of sandalwood."

"Well, I like it."

"I'll wear it for you always," she promised, scattering soft little baby kisses over his smooth flesh. Her lips touched the charm around his neck. "Does this have some special significance?"

"Not really," John hedged. "It's Changing Woman. She's the major female god figure in Navajo mythology."

"I know who she is," Victoria interrupted. "But why are you wearing her around your neck?"

"To protect me from women like you."

"What?" Victoria pushed herself upright.

John smiled at the outraged look on her face. "My grandmother had it

made when I came back to the reservation after my divorce. Her reasoning was that Changing Woman should keep away unsuitable Anglo floozies like you."

Victoria grinned, a wicked, seductively feminine grin. "Didn't work very well, did it?" she said, and stretched out on top of him.

THEY MADE LOVE again, then stripped back the bedspread and slept and woke only to make love a third time. Each time, they revealed a little more of themselves, a little more of what made them uniquely them.

"I've had this one recurring fantasy," John confessed in a hoarse whisper, his thumbs stroking her nipples as she rocked above him.

"Which is?" Victoria prompted.

"You'd stride me just...oh, that's so good!...just like you are now, except...except, ah, Victoria!"

"Except what?" she panted.

"Except that you'd have all your clothes on. Not your panties. You'd have taken them off already and—yes, like that." He put his hands on her hips, urging her on.

"And?"

"And I'd still have my jeans on, but...but opened. We'd be parked on the side of the road in the truck and—"

"In the truck?" Victoria said, laughter and passion in her voice. "You...you too? I had a fantasy about the truck."

"You did?" He dropped his hand

to the place where their bodies joined and found her with his thumb. "Did I do this in your fantasy?"

"OH, VICTORIA," John groaned, tangling his hands in her hair. "You never did *that* in any of my fantasies."

She lifted her head for a moment. "Do you want me to stop?" Her voice was husky, thick with the wonder of loving him, the power she had over his big body.

"No...no...."

THEY WERE in his kitchen. Victoria stood at the stove in one of John's shirts, stirring soup. John sat at one end of the trestle table, wearing only jeans and carefully spreading Skippy peanut butter and Smucker's blackberry jam on bread. They had missed lunch.

"I have a teaching degree," Victoria was saying, "but I haven't ever taught school."

"Because you got married right after college?"

"Mostly. Brad didn't see any reason for me to work. But lately—" *Very lately.* "I've been thinking of looking into getting a teaching position. Maybe—" she stared down into the soup "—maybe here on the reservation."

John was silent for a moment, wrestling down the surge of joy her statement brought. If she taught on the reservation, then they could— But, no, she wouldn't stay.

"I would've thought some classy,

private girls' school would have been more your cup of tea," he said mildly.

"They don't need me." *You need me.* "Nina said there's always a need for good teachers on the reservation."

"And you, with all your experience, are a good teacher?"

"I could be," she said, stung. She stirred the soup harder, biting her lip to stop the tears.

John stood up. She looked so damned dejected all of a sudden.

He put his hand on her shoulder and turned her around, "Victoria, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"Yes, you did," she accused him. "But you're wrong."

He shook his head. "This isn't the place for you."

"Yes, it is," she said evenly. "This is exactly the place for me. Mostly...mostly because I want to be where you are, but—"

"Victoria, don't say—"

"But I'd want to stay here, anyway," she went on firmly, "even if I weren't in love with you, because I can make a difference here. I can be useful."

"You're not in love with me, Victoria," John said desperately. "It's lust. That's all. Just lust."

"You don't feel anything else for me?"

"Affection," John said reluctantly. "A great deal of liking. That's all you feel, too."

"That's *not* all I feel," she said stubbornly. "I'm in love with you,

John Redcloud. So you're just going to have to learn to live with it."

HE AVOIDED HER for the next two days. Two days in which Victoria was busier and worked harder than she ever had in her life, with all there was to do in preparation for Nina's wedding. Victoria found herself harvesting vegetables, hauling water and grinding corn—by hand—as if she'd been doing these things all her life. But she opted out of watching Matt Redcloud slaughter Christina's sheep—the girl's gift to Nina and Bob—electing to stay at the ramada when it was being prepared for the wedding feast.

John showed his face the following day. He had to—the whole family had come for Nina's wedding day. He arrived during the lull after breakfast had been eaten and cleared away.

Christina's sheep, looking more like a main dish now, was roasting over the embers of a slow-burning fire. Huge pots of garden-fresh beans, squash casserole and tamale pie were being kept warm in round brick ovens. Cakes and pies snuggled safely in covered baskets. The corn pudding had been made. The ceremonial corn mush simmered on the camp stove.

The bride was in her mother's hogan, attended by her mother and sister, taking a ritual bath in yucca suds. Maria was poking the cook fires. The men of the family were gathered under the ramada, engaged in discussion. Ricky and Christina were squatting in the dust, playing a game of cat's cr-

dle. Victoria sat on a flat rock in the sun, watching them.

"John, John!" Christina said suddenly, abandoning her game. "Do you see my sheep being cooked?" she shouted.

"I smell it," he said, licking his lips. "Smells great."

"I gathered the wood for the fire," Ricky said, unwilling to be left out. "And I helped with the butchering. It was neat, John," he said with the ghoulishness of most little boys. "Grandfather cut the—"

"I've seen it done before," John interrupted. He didn't like it. Weak stomach.

"We have missed you these past two days," Maria said in Navajo. "Where have you been?"

"Thinking," John said in English.

"You are troubled?" Maria asked, with a quick look at Victoria. "You are unsure about something?"

"No, nothing," he lied, glancing over at Victoria.

She looked back at him with a particularly martial light in her chocolate eyes.

"I'm glad you're here, John," she said. "Your grandmother and I have business to discuss. I'd like you to translate."

"What does she say?" Maria demanded in Navajo.

"You know very well what she says," John said in the same language. "Why don't you talk to her yourself?"

Maria snorted and waved her hand dismissively.

"Did you tell her what I said?" Victoria asked.

"You haven't said anything yet."

"Well, tell her—" she took a deep breath "—I know that she doesn't approve of me. And tell her I know why. Because she's afraid you'll get hurt."

"What?"

"Tell her," Victoria demanded.

John shrugged. "You heard her," he said to his grandmother in Navajo.

Victoria waited for him to translate the rest. "Is that it?"

"That's it. Navajos say a lot with a few words." He looked down at her. "You finished now?"

"Not by a long shot." She looked Maria square in the eye. "Mrs. Redcloud," she said earnestly, "I know you're worried about your grandson. But I won't hurt him because—" She stopped, realizing that she had the undivided attention of every person present. "Because I'm in love with him, too."

Too? John thought, fighting panic. *Where'd she get this "too" stuff?*

"Very much in love with him," she repeated. "And when we're married I want to live here on the reservation, teach school here and—"

"Married!" John exploded. "Who said anything about marriage? Dammit! It's just lust!" he shouted.

"Marriage?" Maria said in English. "You have asked this young woman to marry you?"

"It's not just lust!" Victoria shouted back. "I'm in love with you. And you're in love with me."

"I never said anything about love!"

But he'd thought about it. "And I won't!"

"You don't have to say it. As long as you feel it, that's all I care about," she lied.

Maria's voice broke between them. "Do you propose to take another bride without consulting me first?" she demanded of her grandson in English.

"I didn't consult you the first time, Grandmother." John ground out the words.

"No, you did not," Maria agreed. "And look where it got you."

"Grandmother, please!" John began. "I am *not* going to marry this woman."

"So you say, Grandson. But this woman—" Maria lifted a hand at Victoria "—thinks differently. What have you done, that she should think this?"

"I've done nothing!"

A suspicion of a twinkle appeared in Maria's eyes. But it was gone just as fast.

She reached out, took Victoria's chin in her gnarled hand and turned the smooth, honey gold face to her own. She stared intently. "Has my grandson promised you marriage?"

Victoria didn't flinch at the question. "No," she said.

"Has he spoken to you of love?"

"No," she said. "He hasn't *spoken* of it."

"But you have spoken of it to him?"

"Yes." Victoria's eyes went to John's face, then back to Maria's.

"Yes, I've told John I love him."

Maria nodded, released her chin and reached for her hands. "You have worked hard," she said, touching the small scratches Victoria had earned with four days of work. "You have given a willing hand to whatever was asked of you. You have respected our ways. You have learned your tasks quickly. And you have done all with a joyful spirit." She looked into Victoria's eyes again.

"You will make your home here, on the reservation?" Maria asked.

"Yes." The word was a mere whisper.

"You will learn our ways and our customs?" she said.

"Yes."

"You will give my grandson children?"

"Yes," Victoria said fervently, triumph blazing in her chocolate eyes. Maria Redcloud approved of her. "Many children."

Maria patted Victoria's hands, then put them away from her. "You have my blessing on this marriage."

"Now, wait just one goddamned minute!" John exploded. "I haven't heard anyone ask me about all this!"

Victoria turned to him with her heart in her eyes. "Will you marry me, John?"

"Lord, Victoria!" he said, tamping down the surge of joy her words brought him. It wouldn't work. "You're not even Navajo!"

Victoria blinked. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"I swore I'd never marry another woman who wasn't at least part Na-

vajo, that's what it's got to do with it."

"Oh, well..." A slow smile spread over Victoria's face. "Then there's no problem. My great-grandmother on my father's side was a Navajo," she said. "My great-grandfather was Conrad Cullen. He had a trading post near Fort Defiance," she continued when he said nothing. "They met when he..." She trailed off, realizing that everyone was staring at her. "What?" she said, looking around. "What have I said?"

It was Matt Redcloud who answered her. "Your great-grandmother was Navajo?"

"Yes, of the Bitter-Water clan."

"Why did you not say this before?" Maria asked.

Victoria shrugged. "It's not something I think about very often. No more than I think about my mother being half French. And, to be totally honest," she said to Maria, "I wanted you to judge me for myself."

Maria nodded, satisfied with her answer. John was another matter.

"Well, don't think it makes any difference," he warned her. "You're still a pampered twit as far as I'm concerned." He turned and stomped off before she could stop him.

"Do not worry," Maria said. "He is stubborn, but he will come to his senses soon. Come." She gave Victoria's hands a little pat. "We must dress for the wedding."

NINA MADE a beautiful bride. Standing under the sun and trees in the lov-

ing circle of her family and friends with her hand in that of her groom, she glowed with the special radiance of all brides. The fringe of her white tunic fluttered over the matching suede skirt. Her wide silver-and-turquoise concha belt was a gift from her parents. Turquoise earrings dangled from her ears.

The couple and the bride's father, who was performing the ceremony, stood in the center of the circle. There was an exchange of rings, then the recitation of the wedding vows, and then the bride and groom fed each other a fingerful of cornmeal mush from a Navajo wedding basket with its traditional black-and-white-and-red starburst design.

Victoria looked across the circle of that moment, seeking the face of the man she loved. She found him staring at her with an intent, furious expression on his face. She held his eyes, staring back, while the concluding speech was delivered.

She's so damned beautiful, John was thinking. So damned *right*, standing there with his grandmother on one side and Christina on the other, looking more Navajo than many of the guests. It didn't help that Maria had dressed her in borrowed Indian finery.

Victoria lost sight of him at the conclusion of the ceremony when everyone pressed forward to congratulate the bride and groom. She pressed forward herself, and touched her cheek to Nina's.

"Be happy," she said.

Nina's eyes twinkled. "You, too, my friend." She squeezed Victoria's hand. "Keep after him."

Victoria's eyes widened.

"Grandmother told me," Nina said, smiling. "That means she approves."

She had Maria Redcloud's approval, but she'd lost John's. If, she thought despondently, she had ever had it in the first place.

"What can I do to help?" she said to Maria, as she went to check on the roasting sheep.

"You can help Rose set out the food," Maria began. "On those tables under the trees. Rose—"

Her words were cut off by the sound of pounding hooves splashing through water. Every head lifted at the noise.

"What is it?" Maria began. She shaded her eyes, looking toward the rider. "Who is disturbing this wedding celebration with such foolishness?"

The horseman, riding bareback, was adroitly maneuvering his mount through the throng of guests.

"It's John, Grandmother," Rose said. "And I think he means business."

"You!" John said, bringing Scarlett to a halt in front of the three women. He pointed his finger at Victoria.

"Yes?" she said, feigning a calm she didn't feel. "Was there something you wanted?"

"You," he said again, amber eyes blazing. "I want you."

"For what?" she challenged, her chin up.

"Yes, Grandson," Maria interrupted sternly, but a wide grin split her face. "What do you want with this woman?"

"I want to marry her," he said. "I want to give her children." He leaned down. "I want to love her," he said softly.

Victoria was speechless with delight and joy and love.

He pushed his hat back. "Well, little lady?"

"Yes," she said, lifting her arms to him as he hauled her onto the horse. "Oh, John, yes!"

LAUGHING breathlessly, they rode pell-mell through the trees that separated his hogan from those of the rest of the Redcloud clan. John dragged her off his horse and ducked through the hogan door with Victoria in his arms. She squealed as he tossed her onto the low-slung bed.

"Laugh at me, will you, woman?" he growled playfully, on the edge of laughter himself. And then he covered her mouth with his, and tangled his hand in the black silk of her hair, as he told her silently, eloquently, endlessly of his love for her.

"Victoria," he breathed raggedly, when he could. "I didn't mean it when I said I didn't want you," he confessed. "I do. I want you desperately." Their tongues touched lightly. "I need you." He nipped at her bottom lip. "I love you."

Her arms tightened around his neck in sudden, unbearable joy. Happy tears gathered in her tightly closed eyes. "Say it again," she demanded.

He laved her bottom lip with his tongue. "I love you. And I want to marry you."

Her smile was warm and teasing and full of love.

As if he sensed her need—because it echoed his own—his hand smoothed down her torso to the fringed belt at her waist and pulled at the knot. It fell away easily, and his hand slipped under the soft fabric, over the softer skin beneath. They both sighed.

"Are you wearing anything under this outfit?" John asked, his fingers feathering slowly up over her stomach toward her breast, teasing them both.

"Just panties," she said, gasping as his hand covered her breast. He cupped it tenderly. "Pale pink lace with—" his thumb strummed over her nipple—"with little ribbon ties at the sides."

"Yeah?" Gently he rolled her nipple between his finger and thumb.

"Uh-huh. All—" She licked her lips and tried again. "All you have to do is untie them."

"Yeah?" he said again. His eyes had gone from hazel to amber to gold. His hand was on her thigh when a shout of laughter disturbed the still, warm air of the hogan.

Victoria stopped his hand with hers. "The wedding," she said. "They'll be wondering where we are."

"No, they won't. They know where we are."

"John." She grabbed at his hand again. "It's Nina's wedding. We should probably go back."

"Don't want to." He yanked at the tie on her left hip.

"But someone might come looking for us."

His fingers drifted over to her right hip. "They won't," he assured her, and looked down into her face, his fingers holding on to the second ribbon tie. "Do you want to go back to the party?"

Victoria hesitated, shoulds and wants warring in her.

"Last chance." He gave the ribbon a tug.

"No," she said, wants winning hands down.

He pulled the knot loose. "Good choice." He grinned wickedly. "Because I wasn't going to let you up no matter what you said."

"No?" Victoria looked up at him.

"Well, in that case..."

"In what case?" he prompted, tugging the panties away.

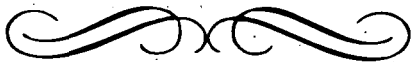
"Well, I've always had this fantasy..." She pulled his head down and whispered in his ear.

"Yeah?" He pulled back to look at her. "A sweet little lady like you with a fantasy like that in your head?"

Victoria nodded.

"Well," he said, reaching for her again, "let's get to it, then."

A scrap of pale pink lace, trailing crumpled satin ribbons, fluttered gently to the floor of the hogan.





CAIT LONDON

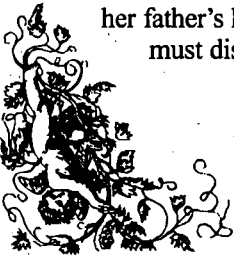


The recipient of many romance industry awards, Cait London is published in 26 countries and enjoys traveling to and researching the sites of her books.

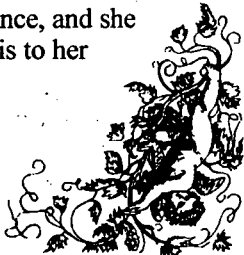
A member of several organizations near her home in the Branson Lakes area in Missouri, Cait is an artist, loves growing and using herbs, traveling/driving and cooking. She is the mother of three daughters, and her greatest passion is creating books and hearing from her readers.



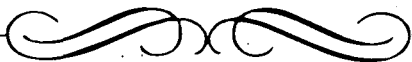
Midnight Rider



Rancher Dan Blaylock had always been there, at least until Hannah had left town. Now she's returned to her father's homestead to claim her inheritance, and she must discover just how important Dan is to her life—and her longing.



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On a knoll overlooking the Ferguson ranch house, Dan Blaylock shifted in his saddle. Watching the woman in the shadows of the porch, he gently probed the bloody handkerchief covering the gash across his ribs.

At midnight, he felt as ornery as El Capitan, the young bull he'd been chasing.

The early November moon slid across the Rocky Mountain night as Dan tracked Hannah Ferguson Jordan. This time they'd settle the past. She'd gotten away too easily sixteen years ago.

Catching the moonlight, her long white robe shimmered as she looked up at the sky. He concentrated on her long hair. Dark red, it signaled a hot temper that only Dan had ever seemed to rile.

"Smokey," he murmured rawly. God, how he wanted her. Maybe it was the effect of the pain pills on the heels of a hangover, but he wanted her now.

The spoiled only child of doting parents and the beloved niece of Earl Ferguson, Hannah had been Dan's personal headache from the age of sixteen until she ran away at nineteen. While she'd twisted every male in the county around her finger, Hannah's gray eyes had openly challenged Dan.

He'd held her off back then, realizing that she was too young for a fair relationship, and decided to let Miss Hannah bridge the six years between

their ages. After she'd had a taste of the world beyond Jasmine and the valley, he'd planned to make her his wife.

That was years ago. Tonight, sixteen years later, he didn't feel like easing back into her life.

He wanted to tear into her world as she had torn his apart.

Because he'd tried to patch himself together in the arms of other women. And he'd failed.

There was no one shielding her now. Not the Fergusons, nor a husband or a child.

He grimaced as pain coursed through him. Nudging Durango with his boot, Dan allowed the horse to pick his footing on the rocky trail down to the house.

HANNAH TURNED DOWN the damper on the wood stove. She should be sleeping, exhausted by the two days' drive from Seattle. But the past wouldn't let her rest.

Tossing the satin robe onto a worn rocking chair, she stood in her long thermal underwear—a practical last-minute purchase, as were the workmen's socks on her feet.

She stared at the fire dancing in the old stove. At thirty-five she felt old and empty, as though she'd lived three lives and lost a piece of herself each time.

Years ago, Hannah's mother, Iris, must have stood before a midnight

fire. Unmarried and in love with a married man, Iris surely feared for her unborn child, worried about the reputation of Hannah's natural father, Earl Ferguson.

Hannah glanced at the spartan room. The old ranch house, original home of Ferguson settlers, loomed around her. Boards or shutters covered the curtainless windows. The electricity had been turned off, and in his later years her uncle—her father, she corrected—had spurned the use of a telephone. The attorney who'd contacted her had mentioned that Earl Ferguson's lingering illness hadn't allowed him to work his beloved ranch and repairs were needed.

Earl had tagged her inheritance with a price tag: she had to stay on the ranch one full year, maintaining it and the livestock, or Daniel Josiah Blaylock received "full legal ownership." During that year, Dan would act as a watchdog.

Hannah frowned. Blaylock's big leather glove wasn't touching the Ferguson ranch title.

"Dan," she whispered. The name was a curse she'd never forget.

Tall and lean, Daniel Blaylock had been pursued by many beautiful, exciting women. "All Blaylock—part Apache and Spanish mix on his father's side," they'd whispered. The middle child of seven offspring, Dan had struggled to build his small ranch adjoining Earl Ferguson's larger spread. While Hannah raced through life, Dan was immune to her charms. He regarded her as a child, not a woman.

She'd thrown herself at Dan that

last night, after discovering that Earl Ferguson was her father. She'd wanted Dan to soothe her scarred heart as he always had. Finding him wrapped in the steam of his shower and the arms of Bernadette Finley hadn't been soothing. Neither had the discovery that for years he'd known Earl was her father.

Bernadette had slipped away during the furious argument and before Hannah had thrown a vase at Dan's arrogant head.

Something had snapped then, as Dan had gathered her roughly against him for the first time.

She'd never forget his rough, hungry kiss. "Smokey," he'd rasped, staring down at her tender, swollen mouth. "There will come a time... Back off before we're both sorry."

An hour later she'd taken what cash she could find, slammed her red Corvette into gear and roared out of town.

She'd been wrong to run away sixteen years ago. She'd been wrong to hate for so long.

Five years had slipped by, while she'd gone to college. John Ferguson, the man she had thought was her father, had died, and she'd been busy fighting for a career in interior decorating. Another three years passed and she'd married Ethan Jordan.

In five years of marriage, Hannah and Ethan built Jordan Interior Design into a moderately successful business. In the two years it took Ethan to buy out her interest after the divorce, Hannah tried to sort out her life.

When Earl passed away, she knew she must place the past at rest.

Packing her vintage white Volks-

wagen, she'd taken a last breath of Seattle's salty air and headed for Wyoming.

Hannah shivered now as the cold wind, coming from the open door, slammed into her.

"Smokey?" Dan Blaylock kicked the door shut.

"You!" She reached for her robe, holding it to her breasts.

"That's quite some getup," he said huskily, tracing the tight, revealing underwear. In the light of the wood stove, Dan grinned, and the firelight danced across his dark face. He had never been pretty-boy handsome, his rugged features too strong. Dressed in a worn denim jacket, jeans and leather chaps, Dan Blaylock hadn't lost a dram of his sex appeal. His grin widened, black eyes lingering on her legs. "Why, I do declare, Miss Hannah Ferguson at her pale-skinned very best," he drawled.

"It's Hannah Jordan now," she corrected, fingers crushing the satin robe; she wasn't prepared for this. "Dan, get out. You can toss your weight around tomorrow. Make an appointment," she ordered tightly.

"Tomorrow will have to take care of itself," he returned. "So you came back after all," he went on.

"I didn't have a choice, did I?" she said.

"You won't make the year Earl set out in his will." The challenge was issued, Dan's dark eyes flickering.

"I can manage a year," she replied evenly. "Ferguson land is not defaulting to you."

His hand reached out to snare a curl and wrap it around his finger. "This

isn't Seattle, lady. You'll have to tend Earl's prime buffalo herd and his Herefords. Pitching hay in winter isn't interior decorating."

"Well, damned if it isn't." She smiled coldly.

In the shadows over her, Dan frowned, his eyes searching hers, tracking the years. "I could use a stiff drink or a cup of coffee."

"I'm not welcoming you anytime, anywhere, Dan. Get out." Hannah fought the urge to step into the safety of his arms the way she'd done years ago.

"So you're back," he said quietly as though to himself. "Back, and mad as a hornet about it," he corrected.

"I'm not happy about you being my watchdog for a year. Nor the fact that if I default you get Ferguson land."

"It's a little late to claim an interest. You haven't been back." For just an instant his hand tightened around her chin.

"Go to hell."

"Tough talk, lady," he said flatly, "for someone who's been crying."

Hannah jerked her head back. "Something got in my eye."

"Uh-huh," he said, and she noted for the first time the deep lines of strain on his face and the way one hand pressed against his right side.

Hannah shivered. "Dan, what's wrong?"

He smiled grimly. "I'm at your mercy tonight, little one."

Little one. He'd called her that aeons ago, too.

Hannah glanced at the crimson stain spreading beneath his dark fingers.

"Dan, you're hurt." She bent to examine the wound while he stood quietly. The ten-inch-long tear was not deep, but needed stitches. His skin was fever hot. "Dan, you need a doctor."

"In the morning."

"You're running a fever..." Her sentence trailed away as his large hand flitted over her breast and his mouth sought hers tenderly.

"You came back," he whispered against her lips, his fingers gently caressing the tip of her breast until it formed a hard nub. Hannah started to protest, only to find Dan's mouth stilling her. "I need you, Smokey," he whispered.

Hannah stepped back, gripping her robe in front of her. "Dan, I'm taking you to a doctor." She pointed to a chair. "You sit down while I get dressed."

When she backed away from him, Dan took one step toward her. "Running away again, Smokey?" His hand lashed out, catching her wrist and bringing her back to him. "You take care of me, you red-haired witch. Cure me."

His eyes were bright, hunger dancing in the dark depths. As though he wanted her... "Dan, your side needs stitches. You could have an infection now."

His voice fell. "So in the morning I'll go to the clinic."

"Oh, Lord," she whispered, knowing that Dan Blaylock was hers to take care of until morning. "I'll probably regret this," she said, placing the huge tin teakettle on the stove to heat water.

"Probably," he agreed. "But I'm all yours."

The raspy, sensual tone slithered up her spine and she shivered. "Okay. Since I'm apparently in charge here, turn around." Dan obeyed. Glancing at his broad shoulders, Hannah couldn't resist following his taut backside and long legs as she yanked on her robe.

When she drew his jacket carefully from him, he inhaled softly. Blood covered his shirt, and she opened it. She eased each arm free. Dan inhaled sharply as she eased the bloody fabric from the T-shirt beneath it, his hand catching on her robe.

"Hurry," he warned tightly.

He gripped her robe as she cut his T-shirt free, leaving the cloth stuck to his side. Pouring water into a bowl, Hannah dampened his shirt and loosened the fabric.

The cotton came free and she dabbed around the wound. A long gash spread across his ribs. She kneeled by his side, probing gently. "Oh, Dan."

"God," he muttered. "Your hair is still like dark fire." His fingers winnowed through it.

When she started to rise, his fist tightened in her hair. "Dan, let me go. I've got a first-aid kit in my car."

When she returned, Dan held the front of her robe, his eyes closing as his head sank to rest on her breasts. "Hold me. Just hold me," he murmured. "I need you."

Tears burned her lids. As long as she could remember, Dan hadn't needed anyone. She slid her shoulder under his arm. "Come with me."

With an effort she managed to get him the few steps to the metal bed. He dozed, awakening instantly when she began to dress the wound. "Press the edges together," he ordered, catching her hair again. "And get me a pain pill from my saddlebags. Durango will stay put...."

"I'll take care of you and your horse," she soothed, finishing the bandage. "Let go of my hair."

"Damned if I'll let go," he muttered. "Smokey."

Dan slept through the removal of his boots and chaps. Later, seated beside him on the bed, Hannah bathed his face and throat in tepid water. She swallowed, watching Dan seek her hand, quieting beneath her touch. Her only sexual experience had been Ethan, who had never evoked a fiery, hungry need. She trembled, fighting the impulse to trace the contours of Dan's lips.

When he'd caressed her breast, Dan's touch had provoked a reaction that dried her throat and weakened her immediately. *Smokey*. The uneven, low whisper tantalized.

He dozed, and Hannah studied him carefully. After sixteen years, at 3:00 a.m., she ached to move into his strong arms.

She eased the covers over him and stood. All she needed now was Dan complicating her single bed.

After wedging two chunks of wood into the stove, Hannah settled down on the rocker, leaning her head back. She'd come full circle after a divorce, returning to Earl Ferguson's run-down ranch. And still fighting Dan Blaylock.

Her toe brushed his boot. Oddly comforted by the contact, she rested her foot on it and dozed. Awakened by a horse whinnying outside, Hannah snuggled against the hard warmth running along her side in the old bed.

"Smokey," a man's deep, drowsy voice murmured against her temple and Hannah's eyes opened wide. A large warm hand caressed her breast as she lay quietly, forcing herself not to move. Tangled with Dan's large, lean body, Hannah felt the weight of his arousal pressed against her thigh. Though he slept, Dan's hands and body were slowly, expertly exploring hers, positioning her intimately beside him.

When she stiffened, breathing heavily, Dan's left eye opened. "Don't move. You'll hurt me," he whispered, his mouth resting over hers just before his light kiss.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Waiting for you to wake up and take me to the doctor."

She frowned, powerless against his strength. "Get off me."

He raised his eyebrows. "Hey. You looked uncomfortable in the chair, so I tucked you in."

"Hah!" Hannah struggled to get her tangled robe from under Dan's leg. "Why I ever took pity on you..." She gritted out the words. "Go away."

"Can't." His thigh slid slowly up and down hers, caressing. "You're taking me to the doctor, remember?"

She scowled up at him as he arranged her hair across the pillow with great care. "Let me up."

"Sure," he agreed then, and eased aside, frowning in pain. "Damn."

Slipping from the bed, Hannah adjusted her robe. "You'd better get dressed," she said, tossing his clothes to him.

"What about you?" he asked.

Hannah snatched her bra, jeans and sweatshirt from the back of the chair. "I'll dress in the other room."

Minutes later she returned to find Dan dressed in a clean shirt she'd drawn from his saddlebags.

"Ready?" she asked, trying to forget she'd awakened tangled in his arms. "I'll help you into your boots."

"Now, that would be real neighborly," he taunted softly.

*

THE DOCTOR eased Dan into his shirt. "The way I see it is, things are going to get real interesting with Hannah around. The sheriff—your cousin, Mike—is falling all over himself. Just like he did when she won the Miss Jasmine beauty contest. He's divorced now, you know."

Buttoning his shirt, Dan slid off the examining bench and moved to the window overlooking the parking lot. The sheriff's patrol car flashed red lights and a small crowd encircled Addie, Doc Bennett's nurse, and Hannah, who were deep in conversation. Mike moved closer to Hannah.

"Crazy," Dan muttered, watching Hannah's hair whip wildly around her head and shoulders. He could feel its warm silk. The softness of her breast weighted his palm again and the smoke color of her eyes ignited.

"Yessiree, Bob," Doc said happily. "That girl always had flash. Miss Hannah is back in town...."

"Send me the bill," Dan said absently just as Hannah smiled at Mike. She patted his arm briefly, then smiled and waved at Nancy Curtis and several others.... But Hannah was steadily easing her way through the crowd, headed straight for Fallcreek Bank and the Ferguson accounts.

Dan's boots hit the wooden porch of the clinic.

"Miss Hannah's back in town," Else Murphy, his older sister, singsonged as he passed.

"Leave me alone and take care of your grandkids. Make me a berry pie," Dan ordered amicably, knowing that each of his siblings was just waiting to take potshots at him about Hannah.

"Hi, Uncle Dan," five-year-old Sissy Blaylock called. "The tooth fairy came last night and I got a quarter."

"That's nice, rosebud." He paused, lifted Sissy for a quick kiss, then handed her to the safety of her father's arms. Logan Blaylock grinned widely at Dan as Hannah strode out of the bank.

Without looking, Dan knew exactly what papers were clenched in her hand. He cursed softly.

"You." Hannah's voice was low and dangerous, her eyes smokey hot as she stopped in front of him. She slapped the papers against his chest, allowing them to fall at his feet.

Doug Fallcreek stepped beside her. "Dan, I..."

"It's not your fault, Doug. Han-

nah's a mean one when she's riled. I should have warned you," Dan murmured, watching Hannah's eyes slash at the banker.

"I want copies of everything, Doug," Hannah said. "A complete accounting for past payments, loans and anything that has sifted through Mr. Blaylock's fingers—including any medical or burial expenses for my uncle."

Her eyes rose slowly up to Dan's. She thrust a vial of pills into his jacket pocket. "Careful how you take those...I don't want anything to happen to you before I get through with you."

AT MIDNIGHT, Hannah punched her calculator's Off button and stared at the files littering the rough table. Her columns of numbers on the yellow legal pad verified that Daniel Josiah Blaylock had indeed fed money into the Camelot. The sums were minimal and deposited when needed. The purchases were baseline, necessary to run the ranch. Payments for Earl's personal needs included a hospital bill.

After the scene on Jasmine's main street, Mike had delivered her back to the Camelot. Within minutes of spreading out the papers, she'd sunk deeper into the reality that without Dan's management, Earl's estate would have long ago passed into bankruptcy.

Hannah snapped her pencil and flung the pieces on her open checkbook bearing the Fallcreek Bank's crest. Before returning to the ranch, she'd transferred her Seattle checking

account to Jasmine. She'd also persuaded the telephone company to connect a line that afternoon. In the morning she'd call the electric company. Everything else would have to wait until she knew her budget for the year.

Standing slowly, drained by every minute of the past week, she crossed to the window.

Why hadn't she come back sooner? Why had she waited to tie her life in Seattle up in neat little boxes?

One of them included cutting her ties with anything that pertained to Ethan. She'd wanted to manage Ferguson land, repaying Earl for the pain she'd caused. She'd wanted to find a peace of mind that only the high mountain air and sprawling fields of Wyoming could give her. She'd wanted to do all that without taking her share of the money from the house and business with her, so she'd locked it in an unbreakable five-year trust, taking only a few thousand with her to decorate the house.

"Decorate and remodel," she whispered aloud. "Hardly. Even the well pump needs replacement."

In the field a cow called to her calf. The moonlight caught on the Herefords' white faces.

Donning her jacket, Hannah left the house to walk toward them.

Steam from their nostrils enveloped the herd as they watched Hannah lean on the fence. "So you're my family now," she said quietly.

The stocky lines of each animal showed they had been well tended, reminding her of Dan's signature on the Ferguson accounts.

Sixteen years hadn't dimmed her

need to have him. She didn't want to think about waking up to his touch just hours ago. Nor the way he could make her feel.

The moment she'd seen his signature in the bank, she'd wanted to fling herself at him, leaving him as bruised as she'd felt. The signature on the papers that transferred money from Blaylock's Flying H spread to Earl's private and business accounts was familiar. Her uncle's last thoughts were written in the same bold scrawl.

The telephone rang shrilly, cutting into the peaceful night. Just what she needed—a midnight caller.

Dan's deep voice sank into her with jarring, sexy impact. "Smokey, there's Ferguson stock on the Flying H. You come and get him tomorrow noon. Or he's mine."

"You're on painkillers, Dan. Sleep it off and don't call back," she said tightly.

"Make that high noon," he said softly after a long moment. "Are you wearing those thermal long johns?"

The line went dead and Hannah stared at the telephone receiver, fury ripping through her. She intended to outthink and outmatch Dan every minute of the next year.

"COME ON, Jessie. Let me in third gear." Hannah shifted the used pickup truck carefully, testing the gears as she drove toward the Flying H adobe-style ranch house.

Trading her Volkswagen for a functional ranch vehicle with cattle racks was the first step to jerking Dan's big leather glove free of Camelot.

"High noon," she muttered, noting the sprawling fields of hay and clover and straight fence rows. In contrast to Earl's spread, the Flying H was neat and in good repair. But Dan's ranch looked like a one-man operation, despite the acres of fields and woodlands spreading up to the Rockies.

A prime Hereford bull lifted his broad white face from the feed trough when she stopped in front of Dan's house, where another pickup, just as worn as hers and bearing the Flying H, was parked.

The door handle grated and Dan opened the door. Dressed in a worn flannel shirt, jeans and boots, he nodded a greeting. "You always did look good in jeans, Miss Hannah."

Refusing to acknowledge his compliment, Hannah stood facing him. "I've come for the livestock," she said.

"That's Fallcreek's old truck," Dan noted flatly.

"The livestock," Hannah insisted.

"I've got a few calls to make before we load Macedonia."

"Macedonia? Uncle Earl's Appaloosa yearling?"

"He needed the vet and tending, and I brought him here," Dan said.

"He needs a home, the same as you.... If you don't want him, I do."

"You'd love that, wouldn't you? Ferguson stock—"

"Leave it alone, Smokey. I'm the only one Macedonia will let near him since Earl died," he stated curtly before the telephone rang and he walked into the house.

The interior of his home was dark and starkly barren, hallways angling

off from a main living room. The rooms were too neat, visually cold, serving the base need to shelter a man who worked outside.

She leaned against the rough planks covering a wall, trying to forget the last time she'd been in his house.

Dan, replacing the telephone in the cradle, looked at her across the wide space of the room, waiting. "Do you want something to eat? There's chili in the slow-cooker."

Without waiting for an answer, he let his eyes skim her. "Ponytail. Eyes that could set a man on fire, sweater and tight, long-legged jeans. Sassy, kissable mouth that promises everything.... You haven't changed a bit."

She shivered inside the hot pink windbreaker, fighting her reaction to him. "Let's keep this on a business level. What's this about Macedonia?"

"He's been waiting for you." Dan stood, sliding his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, thumbs out. "You're pale and thin and look like you're riding on empty. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Let's load the horse, Dan," she managed.

"Sure," he whispered huskily, and lowered his mouth to hers.

Trapped by her senses, Hannah waited.

Dan's kiss soothed, caressing the shape of her lips. Rubbing his parted mouth gently across hers, he breathed quietly, and when his mouth lifted, Hannah fought to keep hers from following. "Take it easy, Hannah. We'll work it out together," he whispered. "Welcome home."

He hadn't touched her, his hands safely in his pockets.

In another moment, Dan was gone. The door stood open and the sunlight shot through it.

Hannah leaned against the wall for support. In that half minute Dan had wrapped her in a tenderness she hadn't experienced in years. Taking a deep breath, she followed him.

Separated from Dan by a board fence, Macedonia ate grain from a feed trough. The Appaloosa stallion's mottled chestnut-and-white coat glistened, his mature lines still powerful. He looked up and whinnied as she approached.

"He was a yearling...Uncle Earl's—my father's delight," she corrected as emotions tightened her throat.

Dan's hand eased up to gently rub the tight cords at the back of her neck. "Earl loved you. The horse was to be yours," he said softly.

"I should have been here," she whispered unevenly.

Dan drew her against his side. "We all made mistakes, Hannah," he murmured.

She rubbed Macedonia's forehead slowly. "Did we? Or did I?" she asked, turning to look up at him. "Say it, Dan. Say how I should have come back and faced them all. Take your best shot. You wrote those letters for Earl...for my father, and you probably read mine in return, right?"

He smiled slightly, turning up the collar of her windbreaker. "Ease up, Smokey. Guilt is a heavy burden."

THAT EVENING Dan broke crackers into his chili, lifted the spoon to his mouth, then replaced it in the bowl. He stared at the flames dancing in the fireplace and tossed the movie script he'd been studying to the floor with his notes on the project. He slipped his glasses off and placed them on a side table.

He didn't want Hannah to know about the glasses—a symbol of passing time that his pride did not want to recognize. A man's pride before a woman was sometimes all he had. He'd have his hands full, once she knew how desperate he was for her.

Rising stiffly, Dan walked into the kitchen. In the shadows, the old stove gleamed and he ran his hand across the enamel, treasuring the dream that one day it would be lined with cooking pots and surrounded by his wife and children.

Empty years spread between his dream of marrying Hannah and the reality of her return. At twenty-five, Dan had visualized her standing at that stove, her body sheltering their unborn child. He'd dreamed of heating early-morning milk bottles on that stove while Hannah slept in their bed, waiting for him to return.

Padding into the empty living room, he retrieved the movie script and his notes. The computer screen had been his friend throughout the nights, plugging holes in a scriptwriter's version of the West. Dan had worked with the lead actress, teaching her how to ride. This time the director wanted Melissa Raven to learn about calf roping.

Squirring Melissa to Hollywood premieres, in lieu of her traveling hus-

band, had suited Dan perfectly in the past. Petite, blond and eager to further her career, Melissa treated Dan as a brother. She often brought her two-year-old son to his ranch during her visits.

Unlike Hannah, Melissa could be coached.

Hannah. Dan reached for his glasses. Hannah Louise and he had unfinished business.

HANNAH SPENT the next three days fighting off dreams of Dan. Inch by inch, she cleaned the living room and kitchen.

Straining, fighting her guilt and doubts, she worked until she couldn't think. Dan's image waited for her to rest and his tenderness reached out to her. *I need you.*

Skidding on thin emotional ice, she scrubbed the old tub harder. Her first recovery, the claw-footed bathtub was pure luxury, even if she still had to heat and carry water to fill it.

Scrubbed from ceiling to floor, the tiny bathroom was lined with small, well-varnished boards. Hannah had picked dry wildflowers for a bouquet. A jar with a clamp-style lid contained bath-oil beads. A basket she'd purchased for pennies at a yard sale hung on the wall, stuffed with new rolled mauve washcloths that matched two thick bath towels. A nubby cotton throw rug covered the stripped-and-waxed tile floor, and louvered shutters on the tiny window completed the country air.

The beauty of the small, restored

room buoyed Hannah's spirits each time she entered it.

But hovering over everything was the mystery of how her parents' and Earl's bills had been paid. What kept the Ferguson land title free? The answer led back to Dan. Though the land was hilly and studded with forests, the Camelot would enlarge his smaller spread by acres.

All Dan needed to do was wait for her failure.

He wasn't going to get the pleasure.

Prying off the boards nailed across the windows suited Hannah's mood as she pictured prying Dan's overlord tentacles from her land.

A new red pickup turned off the main highway, approaching the house. Hannah recognized the driver. She dropped the board at her feet and stripped her gloves off. According to Mort Raznick, Bernadette had happily married a Blaylock brother, James. They had three children.

After sixteen years, Bernadette had that happy, broody look. "Hi, Hannah. I was just passing by...oh, the heck with that..." She lifted out a casserole dish. "Are you ready for lunch?"

"Are you buying?" Hannah smiled.

"Lasagna, salad and chocolate cake." Bernadette's brown eyes slid down Hannah's sweatshirt and long legs. "Wow! No wonder James says Dan is in for woman trouble."

Ignoring the years and the last showdown with Dan, Hannah grinned. "Neat-o to the lunch—yuck-o to Dan. Let's go inside."

After the marvelous meal, Berna-

dette said, "Are you going to show me the mansion or what? Have broom, will work.... You've got me until the school bus drops Jessie on us."

Three hours later the kitchen gleamed and two tired friends leaned against the counter to study their work.

Bernadette leaned closer, her expression urgent. "Oh, Hannah. None of these sixteen years would have happened if I hadn't been so silly, so jealous of you. You can't know how I've hated myself for that night.... For trying to get Dan's eyes to light up the way they did when he looked at you. I stripped and slipped into his shower, thinking that—then you were there and all hell broke loose. I could see that Dan never wanted anyone but you. But don't get the idea that James Blaylock is second-best. I love that man down to his ornery Apache-Spanish bones."

Hannah studied Bernadette's anxious expression and spoke carefully. "You've got nothing to do with what's between Dan and myself, Bernie. I want you for my friend."

"Oh, Hannah..." Bernadette hugged her. "That's just what James said. I've been so worried...."

"There's just one thing I want you and the Blaylocks to know, Bernie," Hannah added. "Daniel Blaylock and I are set for a showdown. My boot marks are going to be all over his backside, but good."

SATURDAY MORNING Hannah sat across from Doug Fallcreek at the bank. When she had asked for a loan,

Doug had tactfully explained the Ferguson family's long-standing economic problems.

"Do you mean that Dan has been supporting the Camelot and my uncle for years? That he'd acquired enough money from the rodeo circuit and advising Western moviemakers to—"

"I'm going to level with you," Doug said quietly. "Dan's finances started with a healthy grubstake. I've advised him to let go of the Ferguson land or it would take him down, as it had your family. I'm sorry, but your uncle was a dreamer, Hannah. Dan is tough and he's making slow progress. But nothing like he would have without the Camelot under his wing. He's paid off the mortgage and has been managing both spreads."

"Because he stands to gain Ferguson land. He could sell it off easily and still come out ahead," she stated hotly.

Doug said quietly, "At this point, with Dan holding the reins, I'm afraid any mortgage with your signature would be difficult to explain to our investors. If you want to try again after the year, I'll be happy to talk business."

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THE FIRST WEEK of December, Dan slid out of Durango's saddle to stand on the knoll overlooking the Ferguson ranch house. He watched Hannah put the three-year-old gelding through his paces on the frozen, snow-covered field. Sired by Macedonia and James's buckskin mare, Apache pitted his will against the woman riding him.

Dan's fingers tightened on Durango's reins and the horse whinnied softly. "She's tough...riding him down...taking everything he has..." Dan murmured, aware that any moment Apache might step into a gopher hole and Hannah's lovely neck could be broken.

"Damn." Dan's mouth tightened when Apache lengthened his stride and headed for a high board fence separating the ranch from three hundred acres of untamed Ferguson spread. In a heartbeat, Hannah leaned low into the flying leap, and for an aeon woman and beast were etched against the gray threatening clouds.

Dan's heart began to beat again when the gelding landed safely in the two-inch powdery snow. He'd remounted and now he slowed Durango, fighting hard to control his fear and his anger as the horse moved carefully down the embankment.

Apache took his own sweet time prancing back to the fence he had just cleared. Dan bent to swing open the rusty gate and Hannah grinned triumphantly.

"You look about fifteen years old," he said quietly.

She patted Apache's damp coat. "He's gorgeous. Smooth as silk."

"One of you is going to end up with a broken neck." Dan held the bridle, walking Durango beside Apache. "Now, cool your horse down. And tell Mike to stay the hell away."

Hannah's eyes widened. "Mike?"

"Mike," Dan answered. "Our divorced and lonesome sheriff."

Hannah took a deep breath. "Dan,

your fist may be clutching Ferguson land, but that doesn't give you the right—"

He leaned over to kiss her hard and fast. "Maybe not," he said. "But that does. Mark Kincaid is spouting off about working all night on your plumbing, and B. J. Fairhair is getting worked up to asking you to dinner."

Hannah frowned.

"Dave Johnson helped you move furniture from Bernadette's. Seems like you've got enough help."

The freezing wind sailed between them. "Did you drop over to gossip, Dan? Or is there a purpose to your visit?"

"Winter is coming, Miss Hannah. If something goes wrong out here, you could freeze to death in your sleep," he returned slowly, suddenly wanting to hold her.

"I wouldn't endanger Ferguson stock by freezing to death, Dan," she stated flatly. "Would you like to come in the house to check the stoves? I've got a wood heater and an electric stove. And electric wall heaters in the bathroom and kitchen."

"I'd like a cup of coffee, if you're offering," he answered. "After that, I'll fix that hole in the barn roof."

"I don't need your help, Dan. Playing the friendly helping-neighbor role doesn't suit you."

"Maybe not." Dan swung down from his horse and held Apache's reins as Hannah slid to the ground, glaring up at him. Dark circles framed her gray eyes. She'd been pushing hard. "You're cold, Hannah," he said. "Go on to the house. I'll rub down Apache."

"Dan..." she began, but he leaned down to kiss her mouth lightly. He wanted to hold her.

"Move it," he ordered softly, watching the confusion in her expression. Whatever was there between them, lying in the past and waiting in the future, Hannah knew it existed.

DAN EASED wearily into the ancient wood chair at the table as Hannah leaned against the log wall, sipping her coffee. Cradled in shadows, Hannah's slender, leggy body suited the settler's house, as if she belonged in it. "There are two chairs, Smokey," he said, pulling the empty one out a little.

"So there are." But Hannah stared out the window.

Dan watched her. What was she thinking of?

Her husband? Lover? Of leaving him again?

Dan glanced into the living room and around the kitchen. "Everything is either old or new. You travel light, Smokey. Are you having your things shipped from Seattle, or won't you be here long enough?"

He wanted to know about Jordan, to know exactly how much better her husband could provide than an ex-rodeo rancher trying to keep up two ranches by day. At night he pulled on his glasses and shot holes in scripts. Between it all, he made enough to survive.

She ripped the rubber band from her hair and tossed it into the trash as easily as she dismissed his curiosity.

Her hand swept through the thick russet strands, shaking them free.

"What makes you think you can survive the winter, Smokey?"

"I will," she said quietly. "I have to."

She'd go down fighting and could lose her life. "It looks like a hard winter. The stock has to be watered and fed, blizzard or not. If Apache spooks and you fall off, there won't be a damn person around for miles to help you. Electricity can go out, so can the phone."

"I'm getting a kerosene heater. There's plenty of wood."

Dan rose slowly to his feet. He didn't want to care, but he did. Hannah took one step back as he scowled at her. "What are you trying to prove?" he demanded, before picking her up and carrying her into the living room.

He dropped her onto the couch. "Stay there. You are going to listen to sense." When she scrambled up, Dan deftly wrapped the afghan around her, hampering her movements, and sat with her on his lap.

Hannah met his frown with her own, her body rigid. "You back off. You're not my keeper."

"You look like you haven't slept in weeks and you're losing weight.... You don't stand a chance," he stated. "Neither do you," she returned hotly.

"Smokey..." Was that aching, raw voice his own? "How I've wanted you..." he whispered, tugging the afghan away. "Let me hold you like I did that night, Hannah...with nothing between us..." he asked carefully,

afraid that any wrong move or word could shatter the moment.

"Dan..." Her lips trembled as she arched against him, the softness of her breast and hip flowing into the hard contour of his body.

His hand found the tiny buttons on her green sweater, flipping them open. "Don't tell me to stop," he said.

She stroked his taut jaw. Then, reaching to cradle the back of his head, she brought his lips to hers.

Dan had never tasted anything so sweet. Her hand slid up under his sweater and T-shirt, smoothing the hard contour of his chest and lean stomach.

For an instant the fear within him calmed. Then another need arose—to have her breasts against his chest. He stripped away their sweaters.

Dan lifted her higher, closing his eyes as her softness finally nestled against him.

For an aeon she lay in his arms, stroking his tense shoulders. Dan caressed her back, sliding his fingers beneath the jeans to stroke the silky curve of her hips. His fingers tangled in a lace confection and, wanting nothing between them, he tore her clothes away.

Lying over him, Hannah kissed a trail to his ear, nibbling on it while he held his breath.

She came at him then, winding him.

Her teeth caught his nipple, worrying it as her hand found him, stroking him urgently.

"Hannah, sweet Hannah...wait...."

Dan surged against the brush of her hand, the intensity rocking him.

Hannah ignited in his arms. "Now...oh, my darling, now..."

Breathing hard, Dan hunted for a measure of sanity. Then Hannah fumbled with his belt and jeans and Dan shifted to help her. Hannah's long legs were creamy smooth and warm on his when his jeans slid to the floor.

Straining to make the moment last, Dan tumbled Hannah to the floor, wrapped in his arms, the afghan with them. Leaning over her, trembling with the need to enter her, Dan placed his elbows beside her head. He wanted to make long, sweet love to her. To show her with his body how much he cared. To set the pace that would bind her to him.

Then she moved, crying out to him. "Oh, Dan, I need you so.... Help me...."

"Hannah...I don't have anything..." Then the tip of his fullness rested against her intimately, and Dan forgot everything but needing Hannah.

He hurt her at first and she stiffened, crying out softly. Poised just that bit inside her moist warmth, Dan closed his eyes, forcing himself to wait. "Hannah, honey...wait. You're...too tight," he whispered. "Honey, wait..."

He stroked her breasts. "Easy, honey..." he urged, bending to suckle the dark rose tip.

A drop of sweat ran down his throat as Hannah trembled beneath him, her body taut. She frowned. "It's been a long time."

Dan kissed her gently. "I know...I haven't had a woman for years."

She lay looking up at him, soft and

needing. "I don't know what to do...."

"You're doing everything perfect, honey," Dan murmured. "You're where you belong...with me." He slid his hand down her body, spanning the soft warmth low on her stomach and rubbing it. "Are you still hurting?"

She trailed a fingertip down to his nipple, toying with it. Dan stiffened immediately, sliding into her. He tensed, feeling the first contractions ripple through her. Sheathed deeply in her, Dan fought his passion. Lying beneath him tautly, Hannah closed her eyes, savoring the intensity of her desire. Her gray eyes opened suddenly, staring up at him.

Fighting his need, Dan kissed her hard on the mouth. "Having fun?" he asked tenderly.

"I..." she began, raising her hips to his. "You taught me how to ride, Dan. This can't be that much different. Unless you're too old to keep up."

Dan lifted an eyebrow. "Honey, we're playing games without protection...." Then Hannah raised her hips, tugging him deeper, and he groaned.

She cried out then. "Love me, Dan. Love me.... I have to know...."

I have to know. The words echoed in Dan's mind later as he cradled Hannah's sleeping body against him.

She had acted as if he were her first lover—tutoring her body to each new caress, startled when he surged against her a second time. Laughing in delight before she kissed him hungrily. "Oh, Dan...I never knew."

Locked in his desire, struggling to prolong the sweet moment of her body joined to his, Dan had whispered

something rawly. He searched for the elusive words now as Hannah sighed. She slept deeply and he knew it would be hours before she woke. What had he whispered?

He loved her. Dan closed his eyes, recalling the ultimate moment when he'd whispered the words:

I didn't know.... Hannah's husky, drowsy whisper filled his memory.

THAT NIGHT Hannah lay on the couch, watching the flickering flames and thinking of Dan. She yawned and stretched leisurely, aching pleasantly in every muscle. In the early evening she'd checked on the stock and noted that Dan had repaired the barn roof despite her objections.

In the house, she had stoked the fire and returned to the couch, wrapping herself in the memories of their love-making. Hannah shivered, licking her swollen, well-kissed lips. Dan's love-making was a storm. Amid the tempest, did he whisper, "I love you"? Or did her dreams of long ago echo through her passion?

She moved against the back of the couch, needing a security like Dan's hard warmth, and closed her eyes.

Whatever the fever to love Dan was, she would find the cure. *Daniel Blaylock was not wounding her a second time.*

THE SECOND WEEK of December, Galahad, Hannah's new puppy, chewed her handmade Italian purse to shreds. Doug Fallcreek placed a deposit to redecorate the bank in Hannah's account.

Dan called her periodically at night, his deep voice rasping across her skin. She still slept on the couch, though she'd managed to clean and finish one bedroom.

Else Murphy, Dan's eldest sister, called to chat, and managed to convey the message that her little brother needed a woman's firm hand if he wasn't to die on the range. Christmas week, she asked Hannah to attend the Blaylock Christmas dinner to be held in the town hall.

The potluck dinner encompassed the elderly to the last eight-month-old Blaylock baby. Else placed Dan next to Hannah. Dressed in charcoal slacks and a dark red sweater, he lifted his cup of punch to toast her, his black eyes gleaming.

"I like the pink lace dress," he drawled, regarding the old-fashioned dress she'd found at a thrift shop.

When the adults and children caroled and exchanged presents Dan sat beside her, his thigh hard against hers. "You're crowding me, Blaylock," she whispered, easing away.

"I intend to, Miss Hannah. It's driving me crazy just thinking of what you're wearing beneath that thing," he returned in an aside whisper just before five-year-old Jennifer came over.

"Uncle Dan, Grandma said you'd help me with this. It's from Santa Claus. I got a brand-new brush, too." The girl held out a package of colorful elastic bands with matching satin bows. Dan took the miniature brush in his hand and propped the girl up on his knee.

Dan's callused fingers neatly parted

Jennifer's thick length of glossy black hair down the center and began braiding it deftly. The little girl preened. "Am I pretty, Uncle Dan?"

He chuckled and lifted her up for a kiss. "Pretty as a picture." Jennifer beamed at him and Hannah's heart skipped a beat. Clearly Dan could affect females of any age.

Hannah helped the Blaylock women later, pouring coffee and serving cake, while the male members sat apart and talked intently.

Emily, a niece of Dan's, nudged Hannah's shoulder. "It's the Blaylock powwow. Women are excluded. They talk about tractors, crops, hunting and fishing. Grandma used to say that it came from the Apache and Spanish blood and pure male arrogance that needed to be cut down a notch."

When Hannah bent near Dan's shoulder to lift and fill his coffee cup, her breast brushed his shoulder. She hesitated, caught by the swirling need to stroke the back of his tense, proud head. Dan tensed, looking straight ahead.

A Blaylock male's disgruntled tone slid between them. "Women. There's no peace."

Dan held her eyes, then he took the coffeepot to place it on the table. His fingers locked around her wrist, and he tugged slightly. "Sit down. You're not going anywhere."

As though a single body, the Blaylock women inhaled and stared at Dan's dark fingers wrapped around Hannah's pale wrist. Their collective gaze swung from Dan's determined expression to Hannah's proud one and returned.

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JANUARY squeezed the valley in a cold, white fist, frequently breaking the electric and telephone lines and packing snow against the walls of the house. But the Ferguson homestead cabin stayed snug.

Each day Hannah's pickup pushed through the snow-covered lane to the highway, then to Jasmine. She worked on her presentation for redecorating Fallcreek Bank and fought dreams of Dan.

Doug viewed her sketches, okaying her swatches for drapes and carpeting samples. He was thrilled with the lobby sketch, instantly approving the mural depicting the history and settler families of the area.

The Fallcreek account led to Doc Bennett's clinic and a rash of smaller businesses, as her schedule permitted.

Hannah helped hang wallpaper and stain paneling. Completing her chores before daylight, she returned home long after dark, where Galahad waited amid the puppy wreckage of the day.

Then there were cattle to water and Earl's small herd of buffalo.

Through it all, Hannah admitted that she had never been happier.

Except for the aching need to hold Dan.

One night the buffalo circled the pasture restlessly. Next morning they were gone, having crashed through an entire section of fence.

AN HOUR BEFORE dawn, Dan pulled up his collar against the bitter wind and backed Durango out of his pickup.

Weather forecasters predicted a winter storm the next evening.

"Doug shouldn't have waited until late last night to call," Dan muttered. Hannah was missing, her house empty. Her pickup stood in the barn but Apache was gone.

After watering and feeding the stock, Dan had used a flashlight to search the outbuildings, then the pasture.

"Hell!" he said when its beam had picked up Apache's hoofprints covering those of the buffalo. He returned to the kitchen and scribbled a note. "Call Else when you get back. I'm hunting you. Stay put."

Dan had taken Galahad to his house and made the necessary calls. A Blaylock male would take care of the puppy and tend the stock. If Dan didn't return within two days, Mike would begin a helicopter search. Dan laid out his camping supplies with extra winter clothing for Hannah. At last he made coffee and filled a big thermos, then a smaller one with hot soup, packing sacks with grain for the horses.

Every minute, fear snaked through him.

"This could just cost her life," Dan muttered.

Rabbit and deer tracks crossed the buffalo tracks as the eerie, bluish white expanse stretched before him. Then twelve miles from the ranch, just as the early night began to shadow the snow, he saw the herd drinking from an icy stream. Apache stood in the shadowy trees and smoke curled from a blazing fire.

Dan's heart stopped beating, his

heels nudging Durango into a faster pace. Then Hannah was running toward him, the hood of her red down coat drawn tightly around her face. "Dan!"

He slid from the saddle and swung her into his arms. She was trembling; her tears freezing on her lashes as Dan tucked her face into the warmth of his collar. "Oh, Dan, I was so afraid. We were coming back. I reached them a few miles back. But Apache stepped in a deep hole, covered by snow. Two calves—"

She held him as though he was a necessary part of her. "There was nothing I could do," she sobbed. "They lay there trampled. I built a fire to keep them warm, their mothers lay down beside them and let me share their heat...."

She began tugging him toward the fire and Dan saw the maimed calves. He drew his rifle from its sheath. "Honey, they're done for."

Staring at the calves, Hannah turned around, sobbing. The buffalo started milling after the rifle shots. Ice clung to their nostrils and beards.

"Hannah, honey..." he managed. "We've got to go. If that blizzard hits when we're out here..."

"I know," she whispered.

THE BLIZZARD struck when they were three miles from Hannah's cabin. As if sensing safety, the buffalo herd began milling and snorting behind them.

Dan tensed and cursed, reining the horses away from the path of the buffalo.

"Hold on," he ordered Hannah

grimly as the herd stampeded past them, heading for their feedlot in the pasture.

Dan slid to the ground and Hannah stood in the snow beside him, laughing as he glared at the thundering herd, retracing their path to Ferguson land. He braced his hands on his hips. "Women! We're in the middle of a blizzard with three miles to go and you decide the situation is funny."

"You look so frustrated, Dan," she said huskily. Something hovered and clung between them as Durango shifted suddenly.

Against Dan's lips, Hannah whispered, "I wanted you to come, Dan. I knew you would."

Dan's kiss was rough and possessive, tender and hungry. "You belong to me, Hannah," he managed.

"Yes." The whispered word jarred him, made him weak and gave him strength.

He lifted Hannah to Apache's saddle, tucking her within the protective blanket. "You call me before you fall off, Miss Hannah," he ordered, swinging up on Durango.

"Yes, sir."

Dan smiled grimly. If the storm worsened, Hannah's cockiness might give her the edge on living.

In the next three hours, Dan pushed hard for the house, taking Apache's reins. Then he saw the glow of the high pole light, dimmed by heavy snow. The fence had been repaired; Joe swung the gate open.

Else ran to them, fighting the wind. "It's a bad one, Dan," Joe called. Buried beneath the quilt, Hannah's body was hunched against the cold.

"Get her in the house, Dan," Else called. "Joe will take care of the horses."

With years of experience in Wyoming winters, Else examined Hannah's fingers and toes. "I think she just needs to sleep it off. Joe says we can stay if you need help, but there's a three-day blizzard forecast. He should get back to take care of our stock. Want me to stay?"

"No." Dan gathered Hannah closer.

Else grinned widely. "Jakie's boy is staying at your place, taking care of the stock. They won't know how to act with a civilized man.... I feel sorry for Hannah, leaving her alone with you. There's stew in the slow-cooker and plenty of groceries to last out this storm. We'll be leaving now."

She drew on her heavy coat and looked down at him tenderly. "She's where she belongs, Dan," Else said softly. "I've been waiting to see this for years...Hannah and you, each needing the other. Call me." She bent to kiss his stubble-covered jaw and then was gone.

Dan sat holding Hannah for an hour as she slept, content to have her safe in his arms. Periodically he kneaded her toes and feet, working his way to her thighs; then repeating the massage on her hands and arms. She murmured, wakening slightly, her hand reaching up to stroke his hair. She urged him to her soft kiss, then fell asleep, snuggling back against him.

He held her for another hour, letting the fierce fear drain out of him, then eased her onto the couch. After stoking the wood fire, Dan folded his tall

length into Hannah's tub. He bathed quickly, welcoming the heat. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he ate and turned off the slow-cooker. In Hannah's bedroom he discovered an antique four-poster with flannel sheets and mounds of beautiful hand-stitched quilts. Using an electric heater, Dan quickly warmed the room and used hot bricks covered with towels to heat the bed.

Hannah protested the move to the bed, but Dan had to have her in his arms before he could sleep.

He dozed for an eternity, rousing to gather Hannah closer. Then he slept deeply, awakening to find that Hannah was gone.

He found her in the kitchen, dressed in a long, tattered chenille robe, a towel wrapped around her damp hair. Hannah stirred the pot of simmering stew, looking quickly away from Dan's naked body. "What time is it?" he demanded.

"About four. I just finished feeding and watering the stock. Want some stew? Coffee?" Hannah's soft, husky voice barely reached him.

"You should have left that for me," he grumbled warily.

"My stock, Dan. My responsibility."

Dan wanted to argue with her, and at the same time love her right on the braided rug. The kitchen scents washed over him—stew and coffee, then the subtler arousing scents of Hannah's bath and shampoo.

Dan swallowed, caught by his stark desire to sweep her back into bed and make love to her. She glanced at him, her gaze slowly stroking down his

body to the bold, jutting evidence of his passion.

When he leaned close to her and turned off the stove, Hannah didn't move. Dan removed the damp towel, combing her hair with his fingers, savoring its scent.

She was all he ever wanted. He'd seen her like this in his dreams—big smoke-colored eyes soft with her emotions, her expression a blend of uncertainty and desire.

"Dan...I don't think..." Her voice caught.

"Don't think, honey...just feel," Dan whispered, bending to kiss her.

In three flicks he unbuttoned the robe, his hot gaze sweeping down the shadowy curves beneath. Then he reached to stroke her breast.

The soft curve filled his hand, the tender nub nudging his callused palm as Hannah's breath caught. He followed the shape of her breasts with both hands, watching her as he gently lifted and caressed them.

Hannah trembled, her cheeks coloring. He absorbed the heat and desire in her, as he slid one hand lower, stroking her stomach with his palm.

When his touch entered her, Hannah shuddered, her eyes closing. Dan found the soft curve of her throat, his face hot against her warm skin. Hannah cried out softly, her hand brushing him intimately before she jerked it back. Tension ran through her like an electric wire. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Dan...I'm...not used to naked men in my kitchen..." she breathed before he kissed her softly.

"Man," he corrected gently, slid-

ing his other hand over the delicate curve of her lower back, exploring the mysterious separation of her hips, cupping them. "Me."

She shivered, arching toward him. The movement thrust Dan intimately against her and she whimpered softly.

She glanced down at him quickly, curiously, then back up to his face. "It's daylight and in the kitchen, Dan," she whispered.

Dan eased back, his dark hands almost spanning her pale waist. "Are you frightened of me, honey?" he asked. This time he intended to make love to her, wiping out Jordan and the quick, heated coupling they had shared before.

"Not a chance."

Stroking the hair back from her temples, Dan circled the indentation of her navel with his thumbs. "Take your time, honey. Do anything, but just let me touch you.... Touch me," he whispered, and her fingers gently stroked the shape of the muscles beneath his skin, discovering him. At each new touch, Dan forced himself to wait. "Take your time, honey," he said gently, watching her.

After a long moment, she licked her lips. "I didn't know how...how love-making should be, Dan. Then we... Then I knew. It should be sweet like spring rain and fiery as a storm."

Dan stroked her hair, waiting. Hannah's gaze ran across his bearded jaw and shoulders, the rumpled peaks of his hair, then slowly across the expanse of his chest. She smoothed the line of hair from his chest downward. Her touch paused at the layers of muscle covering his stomach. "I was mar-

ried and barely knew anything," she whispered.

He closed his eyes, holding and savoring this new facet of Hannah. "Touch me, Hannah. Hold me in your hand."

When she hesitated, Dan gently urged her hand lower. His flesh leaped at her exploring touch, thrusting at her. She stroked him shyly, watching his tense expression, before her eyes swept to him. "I never knew."

"Take your time, honey," he urged again, forcing himself to remain still as her gentle fingers enclosed him.

Then he was sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her back to bed. "Are you sure you want this now, Hannah?" he asked slowly, as if the words were dragged from his heart.

"No," she whispered. "Not yet."

Dan's gaze flickered down the length of her body, his palm skimming her breasts, then the soft inner sides of her thighs. "You're all silky cream and sweet heat," he murmured softly, bending to kiss her breasts. "Taste like honey and strawberries."

Hannah's body tensed. She wanted him then, with a violence that shook her soul. But she wanted more....

Easing to her knees beside him, she kissed his shoulder. Gently urging him to lie down, she began to explore him again, stroking his chest, the hard-sheathed muscles.

"God, you're beautiful," he exclaimed, his hand caressing her hips.

Something went soaring through her, the need to make him remember her forever.

She touched him, sliding her fingers over him and lower, until he arched

slightly off the bed. Wickedly she smoothed him again, and got the same reaction. Dan cursed, trembling with his desire. "I hope to hell this is leading where it should be," he stated roughly. "Otherwise, I'll be crippled for life."

Smoothing, caressing, Hannah ran her fingertip across the tip of him and Dan shuddered. She spoke aloud before she knew her thoughts. "I ache for you, Dan. I'm so empty without you in me."

"Come here," he ordered huskily. "Say that again."

Before she could whisper more, Dan's mouth opened on hers, his tongue playing with hers until she trembled. His hands ran over her, claiming her with rough tenderness. Then he entered her slightly, withdrawing and leaving her shuddering.

Her fingers tightened on his arms. "Tell me what you want, Smokey. Tell me you want me in you...filling you.... Loving you," he demanded.

Tossing back a heavy curl, Hannah murmured, "Take what you want, Dan."

In a heartbeat, Dan snagged her waist and drew her beneath him. His desire poised at her intimate, warm heat as he rested over her. His deep, loving kiss spoke of hunger, promised love in the future. "You were always mine, Smokey. Always. Nothing has happened to change that."

"Yes," she said simply, then drew him closer.

Sheathed in her, Dan rested his head on the pillow. Beads of perspiration formed on his forehead as he lay still. "We're a part of each other,

Smokey," he pressed. "Always were."

He taunted her with his fullness, pressing deeper and withdrawing, pressing into her heat until nothing else mattered. Then she moved, her voice shaking with emotion. "Always. There's only you, my love. Take what we both want."

They were flying, their bodies seeking an ultimate earth-shattering goal. Hannah flowed beneath him like hot satin, her scent filling him. She began to circle him, squeezing with feminine muscles, her soft sighs and hungry mouth driving him on. Her teeth nipped his shoulder as she cried out; then he was poised on the brink of fire and ice, filling her.

She stroked his back later, still locked with him, and he kissed her cheek. When he moved to shift away, she held him, raising her hips and smiling drowsily. "Is that all there is?"

Her hand touched him then, and Dan rolled to change positions, his body hardening again. Seated astride him, Hannah closed her eyes, her muscles contracting, pulling him into desire. Dan suckled one breast, then the other, biting gently at the nub until she cried out softly. "Don't... Please don't ever stop loving me."

Locking her to him, Dan filled her, kissing and nipping the sweet scent from her skin. Running his hand low on her body, he explored her gently, intimately. Hannah went taut, her eyes closing, her body contracting around him wildly. "Dan!" she cried out as passion went ripping through them both.

Later she cuddled against him, stroking his shoulder. "I never knew it could be like that.... Earthshaking..."

Dan caressed her waist and hip, refusing to let her legs untangle from his. "With the right person, it's like rainbows and honey, fire hot. Like a fever, a hunger that's so sweet you ache from it."

"Yes," she said quietly. "With you, that's how it is...."

THEY FED and watered the stock late the next morning and Dan began a snowball fight that ended with Galahad bounding around them as they lay in a snowdrift and kissed.

The snow continued to fall and Dan called Else as ordered. "I'm expecting something good to come of you being stuck out there with Hannah. Make sure I'm not disappointed, little brother."

The day and night stretched, alternating between lovemaking and sleeping. Dan awoke at five-thirty in the morning to the scent of Hannah and the beat of music and an instructor counting, "One...two...three...cross, over. There now, stretch those buttocks, heel out...hold it. That's right! Now the other side..."

"Hannah!" he yelled, stalking to the door.

Lying on her back, Hannah exercised to the tape. Dressed in her thermal underwear, she grinned at him and continued to lift her hips rhythmically. "Hold it.... Hold it..." the instructor ordered.

Dan leaned against the door frame

and grinned. "You've got to be kidding."

"I'm not used to being cooped up inside." Hannah rose to her hands and knees. "I got in the habit every morning and at night." She extended one long leg. "Go for it or turn to flab."

"Uh-huh. I thought we did go for it," Dan returned.

"Nah!" Hannah lay down. "I've just started the warm-ups. Coffee and juice are made. Help yourself."

He ignored the offer, and when she returned to the hands-behind-her-head, knees-bent position, desire slammed into him. "I think," he said, padding toward her, "that there are better uses for your energy."

Hannah's eyes widened. "Dan, you've *got* to be kidding!"

"No, ma'am," he returned firmly, scooping her up and carrying her back to bed. Within minutes, he eased over Hannah's naked body and whispered rawly, "Show me that part about tightening those muscles again...."

When she did, Dan groaned and closed his eyes. "Like heaven," he said when he caught his breath. Then he was taking her quickly, bringing them to a shuddering, exquisite release.

In the aftermath she stroked Dan's taut shoulders and he propped himself up on one elbow, tracing the shape of her well-kissed mouth. He kissed her again, taking his time until she gazed up at him with that sultry, steamy, I-want-more look. Whatever sex Jordan had had with Hannah, it hadn't opened up her feverish ecstasy and hunger. "You make me feel...you fill me to the top," he whispered.

Experimentally she tightened around him and Dan inhaled sharply. Then Hannah giggled and repeated the movement, grinning up at him as his body reacted full force.

He returned the grin. "You think you're hot stuff right now, don't you?" Then Hannah giggled again and tugged him closer, and Dan forgot everything but the woman he had waited for, loving him.

They sat on the floor in front of the wood stove later, wrapped in blankets and the aftermath of their lovemaking.

"When?" he asked softly, smoothing a russet web of hair away from her bare shoulder. He bent to kiss the creamy spot, then her lips. "When?" he repeated.

"What?" she managed in a sigh, nestling closer.

"When are you moving in with me? This place doesn't have enough room for—" He tensed as she frowned.

"What are you saying, Dan?" she asked carefully, her instincts scrambling.

He breathed quietly. "You're moving in with me," he stated.

"Just like that? You're pushing, Dan..." she began, foraging for thinking space.

"Am I?" The arrogant edge of his deep voice sliced through the tender aftermath of their loving. "I want you in my home, in my bed. I don't see any reason to wait now." He frowned. "Tell me that you had this with Ethan, damn you," he demanded roughly. "Tell me that you turned to fire and silk in his bed...snuggled into his arms as if you were a part of him. Because

you are a part of me, Hannah, the same way I am a part of you."

"Dan...I..." She wanted the loving moment back, smoothing the tension racing between them.

"What am I to you, Hannah?" he whispered roughly.

"Friend..." she began, then stopped as his hand possessed her breast, caressing it. "I need time, Dan." She couldn't allow him to push her until she was ready.

"Playing games, Miss Hannah?" he demanded. "*Friend* doesn't describe our current relationship. Move in with me." He bent to draw her into his mouth, until she inhaled sharply.

Easing away, Hannah smoothed his chest. "I...no...I'm not."

His hard lips firmed, his long fingers circling her wrist. "I don't know how you dance this fandango in Seattle, but here we get married. If you want to work, I won't stand in your way."

Dan was forcing her into corners. "Just like that? Because you want to? I'm staying on Ferguson land alone. It's something I have to do," she said.

He cursed darkly and Galahad skulked into another room, his tail between his legs.

"Ferguson land," Dan exploded. "If you think I'm going to hold you to that condition..."

"I expect you to," she returned. "I'll pay you back every cent you invested in keeping my land."

"The will can go to hell. So can the land. Earl wanted you back and so did I... Marry me or move in," he demanded again, framing her face for his tender kiss. "When?"

"I've got to prove that I can manage on my own, Dan."

He tensed. "Life's short, Miss Hannah," he said flatly. "When something good comes along, you hold it with both fists. Or it gets away. I know that better than anyone...."

She touched his shoulder, aching to tell him that she loved him, that she needed time to lay the past behind her, to make a new life with him. Then he turned to her, eyes burning. "Fine. Have it your way. I won't ask again."

Later in the morning he dressed and leaned against the kitchen wall, looking big and tough and bitterly angry. "Tell you what, Miss Hannah," he said curtly, "you want a no-strings arrangement, that's fine with me. If you want anything else, then you'll have to come for me. I'll be back for my pickup and Durango."

She stood slowly, head high to match his arrogance as she fought the tears. "Don't try pushing me, Blaylock."

"Maybe not. Get used to it. You're in for a lot more." He bent and kissed her with a tender savagery that spoke of his possession.

Then he was gone, the door closing with a soft, deadly sound. Beyond the window Dan leaned into the bitter winter wind, fighting his way through the snow to the main highway. Hannah placed her hand over her aching heart. He looked so vulnerable and alone.

That night she lay on the couch, easing into the back and aching for Dan. Then the telephone rang and Dan's deep, raspy voice slid across the

lines. "Good night, Smokey. Keep warm."

She closed her eyes, wishing he were with her. "Good night, Dan."

"Miss me?" he pushed softly, and she smiled.

"Maybe."

He chuckled. "You're in for big trouble, Smokey," he said before the line hummed in a dead tone.

*

AT THE BANK'S grand opening in March, Dan dressed in a dark blue suit, a light blue shirt and a conservatively striped maroon tie. His gaze moved down her cream suit and pale pink blouse appreciatively, and he smiled in that slow, sensual way that caused her heart to beat faster. He ate a stuffed mushroom from the hors d'oeuvres tray, dipping out the shrimp filling with his tongue. Coupled with the gleam in his eye, the erotic action reminded her of his devastating love-making. "Miss me?" he asked Hannah after the rededication speech.

"Maybe," she returned, her legs unsteady as he moved closer.

Dan brushed a russet tendril from the pearl stud in her ear. "You're good, Smokey. Doug and Doc Bennett are both pleased with your work. Comfortable, interesting and business-like. If you're so set on paying me back, what about decorating my house?"

SPRING DRIFTED over the mountains in shades of green, while patches of wildflowers caught the May mist and Galahad chased jackrabbits:

Dan grew more fascinating in every way. He protested a day spent prowling through flea markets, away from his cattle who approached calving. The Blaylocks swung into action, ordering him off both ranches while they tended the herds. At the end of the day, laden with pottery, antique jars and some cowboy's rusty spur, Dan pulled out a rakish, boyish grin that sank Hannah's heart. Then they had pulled into a pine bower and made love in the front seat of her pickup.

Now Hannah drove by the field she had plowed on the first Saturday of May, inhaling the dark, rich scents of the earth. She passed Earl's prime cow nursing a new "beefalo" calf and everything in her turned soft and warm.

Determined to finish Dan's house and build a steady income, she'd taken some small consulting jobs for Ethan. Now she began depositing regular amounts in the account to repay Dan.

She'd found her place, bartering her skills for those of the neighbors, and Earl's dream of a beautiful, productive Camelot shimmered within reach. The house would have to wait. By October, she intended to place a hefty payment against the major amounts Dan had wedged into saving the ranch.

When she made her final commitments, she wanted everything clear between them—her guilt resolved and the debt to Dan eased, repaying him by decorating and with money. Then she wanted to know that she could hold her land.

Apache pranced as she passed, his mottled coat gleaming in the morning sun. When the Jasmine Annual Race came in late June, Apache's strength would far outdistance the other horses

entered in the first event—a short, fast, dangerous race. The course had never been ridden by a woman, but Hannah intended to enter and win.

The racecourse skirted a small hill, dipping through stands of trees. A dangerous rise, requiring a strong horse and stronger rider, lay just before the finish line. The merchants backed the race with a trophy and a fat check that Hannah wanted badly.

The second event, with more prize money, consisted of the same course, a relay of horses and a long, straight race to the finish. Apache had little chance in the long endurance ride. Hannah entered the second event, and began searching for a likely horse.

THE LAST WEEK of June, Dan knew two things: the amount needed to re-decorate his house was far less than expected and Hannah had signed to ride the dual murderous Jasmine Annual Races.

He crushed the list of riders in his leather glove as he stalked into the ice-cream parlor where Gordy Whipplecord was building Hannah a banana split. He placed one hand on the back of her neck, wanting to shake some sense into her. "Take Hannah's name off, Gordy. She isn't riding in either event."

Hannah's brilliant smile vanished. "Of course I am. I've paid the entry fee."

"No woman has ever ridden in that race," Dan stated.

"There's no rules to keep her from it," Gordy said mildly. "She just needs a second horse for the big race."

"I will ride..." Hannah began,

fighting the urge to break something—preferably the neck of the man holding hers as though she were a scruffy, disobedient puppy.

"Damned if you will...she withdraws, Gordy," Dan said.

"Have to hear it from the lady, Dan," Gordy returned, sprinkling nuts over the banana split. "Where do you want this, Miss Hannah?"

"I'll give you one guess." While Hannah debated dumping the bowl of ice cream and toppings over Dan, he plucked her out of her chair. Tossed across his shoulder, Hannah glimpsed down Dan's flat backside to his dusty boots. She tried to catch her breath as they passed Else.

"Morning, Else," Dan said grimly to his sister. "Butt out," he added firmly, carrying Hannah to Apache and plopping her into the saddle.

In the next second, Hannah had jerked the light hitch free and Apache was tearing over the horse path that bordered Jasmine. Dan, crouching low on Durango, followed.

"Oh, man. Trouble with a capital T," Roman Blaylock murmured, lifting his hat to Else as she came to stand beside him.

"When Miss Hannah's around, she stirs him up. Dan needs that," Else said. "Blaylock men get moldy otherwise. Did you get that cradle for Dan's babies done yet?"

Dan leaned forward, giving Durango his lead. "She can ride," he said to the horse, pushing him to his limits. The Arabian, bred for endurance, struggled in the Appaloosa's wake.

They soared over a small rise and Hannah began slowing Apache, talk-

ing to him. The horse was spent, sweating.

Nervous as his breed, Durango sidestepped just as Dan reached out to grab Apache's reins. "Back off," Hannah cried, tears sweeping trails down her dirty face.

"The hell I will," Dan returned, slowing Durango, who had just hit his stride.

Apache breathed heavily, Hannah's hand patting him. "He's tired and needs cooling off. But if you think I'm any less angry, you are dead wrong, Blaylock. You strutted into Whipplecord's and started tossing out orders about me like you always do. Then you hauled me out of there like a wayward child. Take that hand off my reins!"

"I ought to put it on your backside. You're pushing that horse just as hard as you do yourself." Then with a quick curse, he opened his hand and forced it away from Apache's reins. Hannah touched off a protective streak a mile wide in him, but this time she was right. He stayed Durango's need to race, pacing him to stay even with Apache.

Taking a deep breath and tossing caution away, Dan said, "You sleep on your couch when you're not with me. Why?"

Hannah turned away. "That's my business."

"You can't sleep any better away from me than I can from you. You kill yourself in that damn race and we'll both be sleeping away from each other permanently."

"Don't push me, Dan," she said quietly. "I'm riding."

"You're pushing yourself by run-

ning this place and working at mine. Earl wanted you back and so did I. He didn't want you to die filling his dreams."

Dan took a deep breath and said, "I came after you once in Seattle, saw you kiss your...Jordan, and I died. I pushed hard because part of me ripped away at that kiss. Sure, I wanted to hurt you, drive you into hurting the way—"

"You think I don't hurt?" Hannah slashed the back of her hand across her face. "What do you think all this is about, Dan? Gratitude? Sex? What?"

Pain went streaking through him. "You're not charging me full price on the house. Why not? You think I can't handle it?"

Her eyes flickered. "I pay my debts."

Part of him bled. Another part hoped. "That's all there is between us? Mortgages, gratitude and sex?"

For an instant Hannah's smoky eyes darkened. "There's trust. You'll have to trust me about the house. And the race."

He'd hoped for more, needing a commitment from her.

"That's a lot of trust," he said. As the horses walked, Dan rubbed his sweaty hand on his jeans, then strangled the reins again. If that was all Hannah wanted to say—

"Then there's more," she said softly, her fingers sliding through his. "There's love, Dan. Love, deep and rich, filling me. I've found what I've needed all these years and I want to come to you free of guilt and broken pride."

"Think so?" he asked unevenly.

"Kill yourself and we won't have that chance."

The sunlight and shadows passed between them before Hannah halted Apache. "I'm doing this my way, Dan. Then we'll be free. The house is my gift to you, for what you've given to me."

He slid to the ground, reaching for her and holding her close. "You're telling me that this love thing is a two-way street, hmm?"

Holding him tightly, Hannah gently bit his neck. "Think you're up to it, Blaylock?"

Suddenly Dan was young and filled with life, stepping into the sunshine and shedding the past. "Think so. There's one condition—that you let me help you practice and that you ride Durango in the second race."

She stared at him, then grinned. "What a guy. Knows he's down for the count and still trying to set conditions."

For a minute Dan glared at her, trying for a comeback. Her kiss made him forget everything but the soft, sweet smell of love washing over him.

LOGAN NUDGED Dan with his shoulder as the horses lined up for the first race in the morning. "She'll do," he said quietly as Hannah adjusted her body to the saddle, wearing the long-sleeved shirt Dan had suggested.

"Women," he muttered, strangling the locket Hannah had thrust into his hands at the last-minute kiss.

The pistol shot stopped his heart as the horses surged forward. Hannah was the only woman in the race, and her light weight was an advantage as Apache quickly took the lead.

Focused on the race, Dan nodded to the flying rhythm of the twenty-seven horses' hooves. "Take the inside, Smokey, talk to him...talk to him."

Logan glanced at Dan. "Don't know why, but Miss Hannah loves you."

"Damn right she does," Dan tossed back.

A rider whipped his horse close to Apache and Hannah reached out, snagged the whip and threw it aside. The other rider yelled something and Dan tensed, making a mental note that Harlan Thomsen was due a black eye.

The horses dropped over the rise and one rolled down the steep drop to the stream. The rider scrambled to safety as another horse went down. Taking the lead, Hannah leaned back to balance Apache.

Three more horses went down in the water and one more failed the opposite incline. With four other riders, Hannah took the lead of the pack and Dan forgot to breathe.

Dan brought the locket to his mouth, kissing it. "Do it, baby. Ride like hell now and give Apache time to take that stream."

Hannah leaned low in the saddle, talking to Apache when he topped the ridge preceding the short stretch to the finish line.

"Whew." Logan leaned forward with Dan as Hannah led the race. "She's got the race. There's only one person I've ever seen become a part of the horse like that—you, Dan."

But Dan was running to the winner's circle. "Get someone to cool down Apache," he ordered over his shoulder.

Then Hannah was laughing, crying,

holding him tight as she slid into his arms. "I won! Oh, Dan, I won!"

Late in the afternoon, the second event loomed ahead and Dan's stomach began to lurch. Durango knew Hannah well, but his nervous blood could make the difference when racing with other horses.

"Wear this for luck," Dan said suddenly, thrusting his mother's wedding band on Hannah's hand. "And remember that Durango needs plenty of rein. Watch out for Johnny Vasquez—he rides close and Durango doesn't like it."

"Vasquez will eat our dust," Hannah promised, studying the ring and glowing up at him. "Thank you, Dan."

"Love me instead," he returned.

"Always have," she said against his lips.

Apache took the lead immediately while Dan held Durango ready for Hannah. Then she was crossing horses, transferring to Durango while running with Apache.

The crowd cheered, but Dan heard only his heart beating, hurting, filling his chest as he watched. If Durango went down... If the saddle cinch broke... If another rider...

"Give him more rein," Dan whispered across dry lips. Then, tail high, Durango swept toward the finish line and Dan began running toward Hannah. She broke the winner's ribbon and continued to run Durango around the track, talking to him while she sought out Dan.

Her eyes locked on Dan, keeping him still. Hannah smiled and talked as she cooled the horse, bringing him down to walking. Durango carried her

to Dan and stopped. Sunlight burned a fiery red halo around her hair. She met Dan's eyes, her head high.

"This is where I belong. In October I'll move into your place. Not before. I want to finish the year. Earl's buffalo herd will stay in the wild, the way he wanted."

While Dan reeled with her statement, reaching for her, Hannah glanced at the approaching crowd. "I love you, Daniel Josiah Blaylock. Get me out of here."

Then she was in his arms, and Dan shuddered, unashamed of the tears burning his eyes. He carried her to a small house used by visiting celebrities and locked the door.

Hannah was his, a part of his heart, soft and yielding against him. "Make love to me, Dan," she whispered as he stroked her cheek. "Make love to me forever."

"Miss Hannah, it would be a pleasure," he answered.

*

ALMOST A YEAR later, Dan stood near his mother's loom, watching his wife complete a wall hanging for their bedroom. Tiny and precious, Delilah Elizabeth Blaylock cuddled against his

shoulder and Dan tenderly kissed her fiery cap of curls. Hannah's and his love had circled the years, binding them together with a child and fulfilling his happiness. His fascination with Hannah deepened every minute. He'd learned to test the mysterious feminine waters before issuing a high-handed command that left her defensive.

Progress on the Ferguson homestead was temporarily halted, due to Delilah's birth. Finally at peace with her past, Hannah intended to keep the home dear to her.

Dan tried placing aside the fear nagging at him. "Don't even think about riding in the race. Delilah is only two weeks old and you're a nursing mother."

Hannah stopped weaving, rose and slid into Dan's free arm. "Stop growling. My only serious intentions run more to getting back in shape." She kissed the taut side of his neck. "Daniel Josiah. You take a lot of tending and love. In fact, you've done so well this year, staying those macho tendencies, that I've decided to re-cover your favorite chair and try for another baby."

His eyebrows soared. "Think so?"

Hannah's lips brushed his, her eyes filled with love. "Oh, yes. Truly, I do."





LEIGH MICHAELS



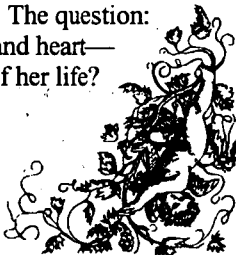
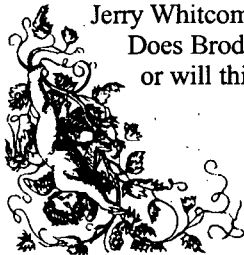
Leigh Michaels began her writing career early—she was creating poetry before she could even hold a pencil, and relied on her big sister to transcribe her verse!

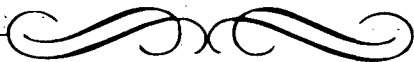
Years later, after completing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism at Drake University in her native Iowa, she wrote six manuscripts for Harlequin. Fearing that they weren't suitable for publication, however, she burned them all, but agreed to submit her seventh attempt—a book that was accepted for publication.



Leaving Home

Lovely Brodie MacKenzie wants to be a singer, and has struggled to achieve her dreams. But she has also fallen in love with Jerry Whitcomb, from the wrong side of town. The question: Does Brodie really know her own mind—and heart—or will this summer be the turning point of her life?





“T here it is! Look, Jerry. You can just see it over the treetops!” Brodie was almost bouncing in her seat as the car turned off the highway.

“All this excitement over a house?” he teased.

“Safe Harbour is not just any house, Jerry. And I haven’t been home in three months. Is it any wonder I’m looking forward to a whole summer there?”

“You haven’t changed your mind about marrying me, have you?”

“Of course not. But there’s no sense in renting an apartment for a few weeks when we’ll be going back to school in the fall. I’m sure Drew will want us to stay at Safe Harbour after the wedding.”

Jerry grunted. “Well, I’m not. I can’t see that guardian of yours being agreeable about anything, much less you getting married right now. And I’m not the best catch in town.”

Brodie laughed gaily. “Jerry, it’s really none of Drew’s business. In September he won’t even be my guardian anymore. And lots of people start off on the wrong side of the tracks. It doesn’t mean they have to stay there.”

“Just try telling that to Drew Hammond. He thinks he owns this town because his great-great-grandfather built it.”

“Look, Jerry, Drew has been like an uncle to me since I was five. Please

don’t say awful things about him. You’ll like him, really.”

Jerry didn’t sound convinced. “Tell me once more how you got mixed up with the Hammonds.”

“My father and Andy Hammond—Drew’s father—were childhood friends,” Brodie recited. “So my dad named Andy as my guardian, and when Andy died, Drew inherited me right along with Safe Harbour and the law practice.”

The wrought iron gates in the high brick wall stood open and the house seemed to smile down at her from the hilltop above the little city of Hammond’s Point, nestled into a river valley. Brodie drew a breath of sheer happiness. The house was so incredibly solid, a three-storey mass of brick and stone, stucco and timber that would keep her safe. That was how she had always felt.

Jerry stopped his car beside the back door, and Brodie jumped out. She peeked into the garage, but the spot where Drew left his Lincoln was empty. She smiled at her own impatience. There was plenty of time to tell him about Jerry.

The housekeeper was at the back door. Brodie swept her into a bear hug. “I’m home!” she carolled.

“I can see,” the woman beamed. “And who’s this?”

“This is my friend, Jerry Whitcomb. Jerry, this is Mrs Riley. She keeps us in line.”

"I know you, don't I?" Mrs Riley's eyes narrowed. "You're one of the Whitcomb kids from down on Cherry Street?"

"That's right," Jerry said. His jaw tightened at her tone.

"Jerry's studying business and economics," Brodie put in quickly. "Since we were both coming home, he offered me a ride."

"I see. Well, bring in your luggage, Brodie. I made those sweet rolls you like so much, if you'd like to ask your friend to stay." She went back into the kitchen.

Jerry grunted. "Since when am I only a friend, Brodie? Was I dreaming when you said you'd marry me?"

She smiled. "Oh, darling, stop it. I have to tell Drew first. Why don't you come in? Mrs Riley's sweet rolls drip butter and nuts and cinnamon."

"She seems to think I'm a charity case. No, thanks, Brodie. I'll go back across the track where I belong."

"Jerry, really! At least come for dinner tonight."

"Must I?"

"You're going to have to meet Drew sometime."

"All right. You win."

"Seven o'clock. And wear a suit."

He drove off without a backward look.

IT FELT WONDERFUL to be home. The big, airy bedroom with its southwest windows was the one she had moved into when her father died. Then it had been bright pink, with ruffles and eyelet. Now it was softly feminine in lemon and peach, the perfect back-

ground for Brodie's sable-brown hair and dark eyes.

Perhaps we can be married here, she thought as she filled the deep claw-footed tub with frothy bubbles. She would love to walk down the grand staircase on Drew's arm...

She was still thinking about her wedding when the grandfather clock down in the hall chimed six. It was long past time for Drew to be home, she thought, as she tugged the skirt of her pale yellow dress into place.

Her foot was on the bottom step when he came out of the library. In other homecomings she would have flung herself into his arms, but this time Brodie hovered on the stairs and simply looked at him.

"So my little lady is growing up," he said with a smile. "Are you too old for a hug, Brodie?"

She smiled. "I'll never get too old for that."

Drew laughed and put a casual arm about her. "I'm going to have a drink before I change. Join me?"

She was thinking, as they walked together into the drawing room, about Drew and Safe Harbour. She couldn't imagine him any other place.

Brodie chose a blue velvet chair that matched one of the colours in the Oriental rugs, and watched as he fixed a Scotch and soda.

He wasn't exactly handsome, but at thirty-three he had the kind of mature, striking attractiveness that makes women of all ages take a second look. For the first time in her life, Brodie felt a twinge of curiosity about the girl who had jilted him. She had been just a child at the time, but she knew that

Drew had never been serious about another woman since Cynthia.

Drew turned from the trolley. "Why so serious?" he asked. "Mrs Riley tells me we're having a guest for dinner."

"Do you mind, Drew? I know it's my first night at home, and we always have a quiet evening, but..."

Drew sat down on the couch. "I gather that he's a special guest," he observed.

"A very special guest. My fiancé, in fact."

Drew's eyebrows shot up. "Aren't you a little young for this? You have two years of college left."

"I know what I want, Drew. I want to marry Jerry."

"Ross Whitcomb's boy." Drew's voice was dry. "You won't have had the pleasure of meeting Ross yet."

"I know he served time in prison—but that was nothing to do with Jerry."

"That's true," he admitted.

Brodie pressed her advantage. "Drew, Jerry is determined to make his own way. He isn't going to stay in that gutter, you'll see."

"Perhaps I shall." Drew set his glass down. "I'd better go change clothes so I'm prepared to meet this paragon."

THE CONVERSATION at dinner was cool and civil. Drew wasn't making it easy for Jerry, but neither was he using his courtroom cross-examination techniques.

And Jerry was doing very well indeed, Brodie thought proudly. He

looked like the banker he might someday be, in a dark blue pinstriped suit and discreet tie. He was looking Drew straight in the eyes and answering his questions calmly.

"I'll be working at Fanning Brothers this summer," Jerry was saying. "On the manufacturing line. Though I'd love to get in at management level."

Drew nodded. "What are you going to do with yourself this summer, my girl?" he asked Brodie.

"I thought I'd ask the boss for my old job back."

"What if the position has been filled?" he teased.

"Come on, Drew. You know I'm the best office girl you ever hired."

"That's probably true," he mused. "Very well, Bro, you have a job, whenever you want to start."

"Next week, all right? I'll take a few days off first. And of course I'll have wedding plans to make."

"Have you set a date?" Drew asked.

Brodie sent a triumphant look at Jerry. "Soon," she said.

"Perhaps the end of August?" Drew suggested.

"I don't want to wait that long," Brodie wailed.

"Oliver Fanning won't be pleased if Jerry asks for time off in the middle of the summer for a honeymoon."

"That's right," Jerry agreed. "In any case I can't afford much of a trip..."

"Maybe Drew will make that his gift to us," Brodie said.

It bounced off Drew, but Brodie wasn't upset.

"Let's go pick out my ring tomorrow, Jerry. Now that it's official..."

"It isn't," Drew said. "Not till it's been announced."

"But, Drew!" she protested.

Jerry saw the angry colour rise in Brodie's cheeks and intervened. "We'll do as Drew likes, Brodie."

"Then at least let's do it right away. Can we have a big party, Drew? What about Saturday night?"

"Very well. Now I'd like to talk to Jerry alone."

"I'll be waiting," she promised blithely and danced out to the kitchen.

"We're having a party Saturday night," Brodie told Mrs Riley.

"It'll be nice to see Safe Harbour sparkle again."

"It always sparkles," Brodie countered.

"Not like it does with a party. I'll have to start polishing silver tomorrow," Mrs Riley said, half to herself.

"I'll begin on the guest list right now," Brodie reached for a notepad. She was still hard at work when Jerry came down the hall.

"I'll see you tomorrow, darling," he said. "We'll go pick out your ring, even if you can't wear it just yet."

Brodie walked out to his car with him, and she was still bubbling when she came back. Mrs Riley was standing in the middle of the kitchen, hands on her hips. "This is an engagement party?" she asked sharply. "You're going to marry that young punk?"

"Jerry isn't a delinquent, Mrs Riley," Brodie began hotly.

"To think that the young lady of this house has so little opinion of herself as to get mixed up with—"

"The young lady of this house knows quite well what she wants, Mrs Riley!" Brodie stalked out and up the stairs.

Drew was in the sitting room next to his bedroom, a magazine on his lap.

"I just came in to tell you that Mrs Riley seems to think that I'm crazy to marry Jerry."

"She may have community support."

"You of all people should understand, Drew. All men are created equal, you know."

"But sometimes they don't stay that way. Just how do you think you and Jerry are going to live for two years till he's self-supporting?"

"We'll manage. I want to ask you about something, Drew." She curled up in the chair opposite his. "We've talked before about my college education, and you know that I've had all the singing lessons I can absorb. It's time for me to get out and perform."

"Not true. Some of the best singers in the world take lessons every day. But I can tell that isn't the bottom line."

"You're right. I know what these two years of college have cost you, Drew. And I know that you want me to go on." She took a deep breath. "So if you're going to spend the money, anyway, instead of paying my tuition next year, will you pay Jerry's?"

"No. I'm willing to invest in your future, Brodie. Jerry hasn't yet convinced me to place my bets on him."

"But Jerry is my future, Drew! His education will mean security for me."

He shrugged. "So will yours. And if your marriage breaks up—"

"It won't break up, Drew. I won't let it."

"Did Jerry ask you to do this?"

"No! He wouldn't ask for anything for himself. He doesn't even know I was thinking about it. Will you do it?"

"In words of one syllable, Brodie—no, I won't. I will give you an engagement party and a wedding and a gift. It will not be the honeymoon, by the way—" He broke off suddenly, shook his head. "I have a moral obligation to your father, and mine. But once married, you aren't my responsibility anymore, Brodie."

She was stunned. This wasn't the uncle who had always indulged her whims, the big brother who had spoiled her. "I thought—after we were married—" She started again. "I thought perhaps we could live..."

"Here at Safe Harbour?" His smile was twisted. "No, Brodie. Once you leave this house as Mrs Whitcomb, you will come back only by invitation."

Anger swept over her. "You're trying to make me back down!" she cried.

"Not I," Drew denied. "I'm just presenting the facts, so that your decision is made with full knowledge of the consequences."

She stormed across the room and turned at the door. "Well, it isn't going to work, Drew. I'll marry whom I please, when I please. It's none of your damn business!"

DREW WAS whistling softly through his teeth as he tinkered with the engine of the Lincoln. He'd parked the car just outside the back door when he'd come home from playing golf at the country club two hours ago. Brodie suspected darkly that there was nothing wrong with the car; Drew just didn't want to come into Safe Harbour today because somebody might hand him a polishing cloth.

Across the table sat her best friend from college. "We've been polishing silver for hours," Janet said. "How many candlesticks does it take to light this house?"

"You'd be amazed," Brodie said.

Mrs Riley looked up from slicing raw vegetables for the dips. "There's iced tea in the refrigerator," she said. "Have a break, girls. Take Mr Hammond a glass, Brodie."

Brodie looked sullen, but it was no use arguing with Mrs Riley; the ice still hadn't cracked since their quarrel, almost a week ago.

She paused and admired the cake that stood on the tea trolley. "Best Wishes, Brodie and Jerry," it said in icing. Brodie smiled to herself. Tonight it would all be official. Tonight she could put on the lovely diamond ring they had chosen.

Janet held the back door open. "Let's go sit in the gazebo," she said.

"Here's a glass of tea, Drew," Brodie said politely. That quarrel hadn't eased yet, either.

"Thanks." He took the glass.

Brodie didn't answer, but crossed the drive to the gazebo.

"I don't believe how good-looking he is," Janet sipped her tea. "I've

never known a man with green eyes before. And just look at those muscles. With Drew as an example, I can't imagine you falling for Jerry Whitcomb."

"I thought you liked Jerry."

"I do, but he's really not marriageable material, Bro."

"And you think Drew is? No woman has got close to him in ten years."

Janet sank back on the bench. "What are you going to do, Bro?"

"As soon as we go back to school, I'll start looking for a job. There are nightclubs all over that town. I'll be what I've always wanted to be—a singer."

Janet shook her head. "Most of those so-called nightclubs are only bars, Bro. And you can't make a living doing that. Why don't you be sensible? Postpone your wedding and stay in school."

Brodie's chin set stubbornly. "We'll make it together." She swirled the ice-cubes in her glass. "And Drew seems to be getting used to Jerry. He even invited him to play golf today."

SAFE HARBOUR was glowing by the time they were done. How lucky Drew was to own all this, Brodie thought as she walked through on a final inspection. A flicker of jealousy ran along her spine.

Drew was still working on the Lincoln. He'd apparently finished with the motor, though, and was now buffing the dark grey finish to a shine.

Just what was it that Janet saw in Drew, Brodie wondered. He was

good-looking, but from Brodie's perspective, thirty-three seemed ancient.

She fixed herself a ham and cheese sandwich and wandered outside, thinking vaguely that she should try to talk to him. The last few days had been unpleasantly silent.

She pulled up a lawn chair and sat down. "Do you think anybody suspects what the party is all about?"

"In Hammond's Point? If you wanted to keep it a secret, you and Romeo should have gone farther than Brooke's Jewellery to buy your ring, Brodie."

"I wish you wouldn't call Jerry that, Drew."

"Why not? It seems to me there are a lot of similarities." He stepped back to inspect his work.

"I know you don't think he's a good choice, but the fact is, he's the man I love, Drew."

"At twenty, my dear, girls don't know what the hell love is all about. They think it's some kind of game."

"I'm not like Cynthia, Drew!" The words burst out, and Brodie bit her tongue. Never had she dared to say that name to him.

Drew laughed sharply. "Cynthia was an expert at the game, that's sure," he said. "Since we aren't going to agree on this, let's call a truce, all right?"

"I don't want to argue either," Brodie said softly.

He looked up then, with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "If you're finished with your sandwich, how about making me one?"

"Sure." She picked up her plate and started for the house.

She was spreading mustard on his ham and cheese when Jerry knocked at the back door. "You're early," she said, raising her face for his kiss. Then she noticed his jeans.

"I need to talk to you, Brodie."

"It'll have to be fast. I still have to take a shower."

"It won't take long." Jerry looked worried. "Brodie, maybe we shouldn't go ahead with the party tonight."

"What do you mean? Not announce our engagement?"

He nodded. "You didn't tell me what Hammond said to you about us getting married. It's time for the truth."

When she had finished, Jerry was silent. "I don't believe you didn't tell me this before, Brodie. He's as good as said he's finished with you once we're married."

"He's only my guardian for another four months, Jerry. Then he'd be through with me anyway."

"But we can't live till September without any money, Bro. Be reasonable!"

"Jerry, we both have jobs. We—"

"You'll be getting pin money at his law firm," he said curtly. "And I'm not saving much from my salary," Jerry added, "even living at home where it's free. If I add rent and groceries—there just won't be enough money."

"We'll make it, Jerry. We'll be careful."

"Obviously you have never lived on a budget."

"I can learn." Brodie's tone bristled with irritation.

"Well, getting married this summer is out. We'll just wait till September when you're twenty-one. Unless—" He shook his head. "There has to be a way to shake some cash out of him."

"There isn't, Jerry. It's his money, and he isn't obligated to give *any* of it to me."

He shook his head. "What about your money?"

"What money?" Brodie started to laugh. "The McKenzies never managed to accumulate enough cash to need a bank account, Jerry. The only thing of value that my father possessed was a good friend named Andy Hammond." But there was no answering laughter from Jerry. "It doesn't matter, does it, Jerry?" Her voice was hollow. "Does it?"

He dropped into a chair and raised stricken eyes to her. He sighed heavily. "That does it. It was true, after all."

"What was true?" But there was no answer. "Jerry," she said softly, "if you don't think we can manage now, then we'll wait a couple of years, till you're through school. We have plenty of time."

"You might," he said bitterly. "But mine is called time payments. How do you think I managed to buy that diamond ring?"

"I thought—you said you'd saved some money..."

His laugh was a sneer. "Enough to buy that rock? Not quite. I borrowed five hundred bucks from a guy at work for the deposit—said I'd pay him back when we were married."

Her dark eyes were filled with hor-

ror. "You expected Drew to pay for my engagement ring?"

"No. But I thought once you were getting a bigger allowance..." He slammed his fist down. "Oh, hell."

"We'll have to take the ring back. It's not the end of the world, Jerry."

He looked up at her, astounded. "You really don't understand, do you, Brodie? It isn't just the ring. There's tuition next fall, and living expenses, and other debts."

"We can borrow the money—"

"Banks frown on lending money to students who aren't making passing grades." He laughed. "Surprised, Brodie? Last semester I was working two jobs, plus romancing you. What a waste of time."

She flinched away from his cruel words.

"I grew up pinching pennies and hoping that my luck would change. I don't want to wait for 'someday.' I want the good things now! Don't you see, Brodie?"

Her dream world was caving in under her feet. "When you thought I was rich, Jerry, it was convenient to be in love with me. Now that I'm just another girl—"

"Dammit, Brodie, you lied to me!" His chair spun away as he lunged across the room. His eyes blazed.

Brodie shrank back. "I didn't lie, Jerry." He's going to strike me, she thought. Jerry—the man I love—is going to hit me.

The back door banged as Drew burst into the room. "Whitcomb," he warned, "if you touch her, you'll spend the night in jail."

Jerry's hands dropped.

"Go to your room, Bro," Drew ordered.

She slid past Jerry and paused in the doorway. "Thanks, Drew." She managed to choke out the words. Then she climbed the stairs to her room.

"My engagement party," she said, her voice breaking, and pushed her dress into a heap at the end of her bed. She willed the tears to come, but the hurt was too deep to cry away. She lay dry-eyed and tense till Drew pushed the door open.

"Are you all right, Bro?"

"Is he gone?"

Drew sat down on the edge of her bed, his hand gentle on her shoulder. "He won't be back, Brodie."

"Did he tell you what happened?" Brodie sniffed.

"I heard most of it. The window was open, you know. I didn't intend to interfere, but when he came after you..."

Brodie shivered and hid her face against his shoulder.

Drew glanced at the clock on her dressing table. "You have half an hour to make yourself presentable."

"I'm not coming down, Drew. I can't."

"Yes, you can. And you have to. You're the one who broke the engagement, remember?"

"It didn't feel that way to me," Brodie grumbled.

"It has to look like it was your idea, Bro."

"Why? Because Hammonds don't get jilted?" Abruptly, she realised that for the second time in a day, she'd thrown Cynthia in his face. She saw that his green eyes had hardened, and

she stumbled on. "Well, I'm not a Hammond, Drew. I'm no better than Jerry is, and..."

Anger crackled in his voice. "Don't you ever say that again, Brodie McKenzie. Jerry is a fortune-hunting con artist. You're sweet and honest and true. Now come on, and get dressed."

"I can't face all those people."

"Yes, you can. You have my support, and Janet's. And Mrs Riley was singing as she put that fancy cake down the garbage disposal one slice at a time."

"She never did like Jerry."

"At the risk of saying I told you so—perhaps her instincts were better than yours."

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THE DRAWING ROOM was full of people, and the crowd had spilled out onto the terrace. For one terrifying moment, Brodie thought she was going to faint. Then she fixed a smile on her lips and moved into the crowd.

No one seemed to notice. Janet's skillful use of make-up had disguised Brodie's white face, and as she moved through the crowd, introducing Janet, overhearing bits of conversation, she felt as if she wasn't really there.

She saw, out of the corner of her eye, that one of their neighbours had nudged Drew. "Brodie has become a remarkably pretty woman, Drew," he said, with a knowing smile.

She couldn't hear Drew's reply as she walked away, but the man's assumption made her angry. Did every-

one in Hammond's Point think that her father had left her a fortune?

Suddenly aware that she was being watched, she turned from the buffet table to meet big blue eyes. The girl watching her was a tiny thing with fluffy blonde hair. She looked even more ill-at-ease than Brodie felt.

Touched by the girl's plight, she strolled over. "I don't think I know you," she said gently.

The girl laughed nervously. "I'm Isabel Fanning. And I've just come back from school in Switzerland."

"Are you home for the summer, then?"

Isabel gulped her punch nervously. "I graduated, you see, and I think Daddy's going to let me go to college here. If I go to college at all, that is."

And no doubt Daddy was the source of most of Isabel's insecurity, Brodie thought, as a voice boomed beside her. "Is Isabel bothering you, Miss McKenzie?"

"Of course not, Mr Fanning," Brodie said firmly. "She was just asking about my college, and I've invited her to tea one day next week so we can talk about it."

"Thank you," Isabel muttered when her father had moved on. "Did you really mean it, about coming to tea?"

"Of course. Is Tuesday all right? We don't have to talk about college, either." She stood up with a smile and soon escaped to the terrace, then on to the formal garden. "The worst is over, Brodie," she told herself.

But the pain didn't ease. Janet stayed an extra day, and it was almost a relief for Brodie to see her go. She

was too much a part of the happy days with Jerry, when love was light-hearted and life was beautiful. Late Monday afternoon, she waved goodbye to Janet, then wandered back to the house.

"Is that beef Wellington I smell?" Brodie asked Mrs Riley.

"It's Mr Baxter's favourite," she said.

"Did Drew invite him for dinner?" She didn't sound interested. Daniel Baxter was Drew's partner in the law firm, and not one of Brodie's favourite people.

"Too bad I had to miss your welcome-home party, Brodie," he said later, over the blueberry cheesecake. "Though I had heard it was more than that."

"You can hear almost anything from the gossips in this town, Daniel," Drew said.

"You never have let gossip bother you, have you, Drew?" his partner said. "With the things that have been said about you over the years..."

What things, Brodie wondered. Drew was the most honest person she'd ever known.

Just then Mrs Riley came to the door. "There's a telephone call, Mr Hammond. The one you've been waiting for."

Drew tossed his napkin down. "If you'll excuse me?" he said. "Please go ahead with coffee."

"The boy works too hard," Daniel complained, as Brodie refilled his cup. "He needs some recreation." He leered at her. "If you know what I mean."

Brodie bit her lip. "He isn't a boy, Daniel."

"Would you throw a temper tantrum if Drew got married?" he asked bluntly.

Brodie blinked. "Is he thinking about it?"

"I have no idea," he said, but the denial was too smooth. "You would raise hell with him, wouldn't you?"

"Drew makes his own choices, Daniel."

"But as long as you're here at Safe Harbour, he can't do as he likes. Isn't it about time he was free?" He folded his arms on the linen cloth. "Drew was twenty-one when Andy died. That's pretty young to be responsible for a little kid. And from what I hear, he's still pulling you out of scrapes. When are you going to grow up, Brodie?"

"I don't believe I have to listen to this from you, Daniel."

"Then you'd better think again. I was just as good a friend to your dad as Andy Hammond was."

"I didn't know that."

"When John was dying, he brought you back to Hammond's Point because he knew either Andy or I would take care of you. At the time, I was thinking of moving. John wanted you to grow up here, so Andy became your guardian."

Brodie sipped her coffee. Her lips felt stiff. "If Drew objected, why didn't he do something about it?"

"Because Drew is a very moral man, and he felt an obligation to his father. But don't fool yourself. He's counting the days till you'll be out of his care."

Brodie thought, but Drew said at the party that I could stay here at Safe Harbour as long as I wanted. Did he resent losing the freedom he'd had when she was away at college?

Drew came back in with a smile. "Let's go play chess, Daniel. Unless you and Brodie were having an important talk?"

Daniel pushed his chair back. "We've finished," he said jovially.

There was nothing worth watching on television, but Brodie sat staring at it anyway. Was Daniel right? Was her dependence on Drew keeping him from doing as he liked?

"I won't continue to be a leech," she told herself firmly. "I must stop pretending to be the princess of the castle someday, and it might as well be now."

"Talking to yourself, Bro?" Drew asked. "You look sad. Was it something Daniel said?"

"Yes. He told me you were tired of being responsible for me."

Drew frowned. "It's sweet of him to be concerned, but too bad he isn't more accurate."

She didn't look at him as she said quietly, "Daniel said you're thinking of getting married."

"I guess I'll have to be a little more careful of what I tell him."

"So it's true."

"I've considered it. And rejected the idea."

"Why? Because of me? I'm a big girl now, Drew. I can take care of myself."

"You gave real evidence of that when you brought Jerry home," he pointed out. "It was apparent to any-

one with two eyes what Jerry wanted, but if it had been left up to you, Brodie, you'd still be blindly in love."

She stared at him a long time, and certain things began to make sense. He had known that argument would not convince her. So he had simply set out to quietly destroy her plans.

"You invited Jerry to play golf with you that day," she said softly. "I thought it was strange—but you made sure he knew I didn't have a penny, didn't you, Drew?"

His voice was sombre. "Would you have preferred to find out after you were married that he was only interested in money?"

She was working herself into an old-fashioned rage. "You deliberately messed up the only thing I've ever really wanted, Drew!"

"And ruined your life," he mocked. "Blame it on me if you must, Bro. I'm handy."

"I suppose you thought you were being helpful. Well, I want to do it on my own. You don't have to count the days anymore—they're over!" She stormed out.

His voice caught her in the hallway. "Stop and think, Bro, or you'll throw away something that means more to you than you will ever understand."

THEY'D SET aside a dressing room for her at the nightclub. That was a fancy name for it, Brodie thought. "Closet" would have been better. It was so small that she dressed in her room at the cheap hotel where she'd been for two weeks now, and walked to the nightclub.

Her dress was one she had bought for a college dance. It was pale orange, and—the manager was right—totally out of place at this club. Well, Brodie thought, if he wanted her to dress differently, he'd have to increase her wages. The way it was, she was at the bank every other day withdrawing a few dollars from her dwindling savings account.

She hoped that the crowd would be a decent one tonight. There had been a bunch of rowdies coming in the past few nights, heckling her. The manager was no help. He just laughed and said that the teasing helped to loosen her up.

Most of the tables were empty when she started to sing. Many of the patrons were still in the dining room. She started with some easy things, modern songs that didn't threaten her range. She was risking her voice, anyway, in the smoky atmosphere, with no private place to warm up.

The rowdies came in, partway through the show, and took their regular table up front. There were only three of them tonight, Brodie saw, but they were the loud ones.

Another loud group came in, sitting near them. Brodie didn't see who was there till she was halfway through a love song. Then her voice cracked in the middle of a phrase.

Jerry, she thought miserably. She hadn't seen him since the face-to-face in the kitchen at Safe Harbour.

He was in a group, and when Brodie saw the girl he was with, her fingers stumbled over the piano keys. It was Isabel Fanning, who looked as if her greatest dream had come true.

Brodie saw her reach up to pat Jerry's cheek. On her left hand gleamed an enormous diamond.

On Brodie's next break, the manager called her aside. "What's the matter with you, Brodie?" he asked angrily. "You told me you could play the piano."

"It needs tuning," she retorted.

"Nobody else has complained. And Brodie, you're already costing me more than I like to pay. Just how many customers do you think you're bringing in?"

"There are a lot of people out there listening to me."

"Exactly. They're listening, but they aren't drinking. There's only one guy I'm positive is here because of you, and one Scotch and soda isn't going to make me a profit tonight."

Drew was here? Don't be silly, Brodie, she told herself. Drew isn't the only man who drinks Scotch and soda.

"Watch your step, Brodie, or you'll be looking for a job again," the manager added.

Her dressing room, tiny as it was, would be a haven of peace for a few minutes. She needed the time to get ready for the second half of the show.

But she wasn't to have the opportunity. Her Scotch-drinking customer was Drew, after all. She spotted him at a back corner table, alone. He raised a casual hand, and when she came over, he stood up. "Would you like to join me?"

"Why are you here, Drew?" she asked curtly.

He held her chair. "I wanted to see your show."

"I'm certain you have some comments about it."

"I'm not sure you want to hear them," he warned.

"I'm a professional now. I can take it."

"All right. The show stinks, Brodie," he said flatly. "You aren't cut out to be a nightclub singer. You don't belong here."

"As the manager told me, it isn't Carnegie Hall. But we can't all start at the top."

"By the time you get out of here, you may not have any voice left."

"I'll take my chances. I have to go now."

Drew stood up as she left the table. A few minutes later she noticed that he had left the club.

The rowdies were drinking heavily tonight. Several times they interrupted Brodie's performance to try to buy her drinks. By the time the show was finished she was shaking from irritation and anger.

THE CITY LIGHTS were dim down in this part of town, Brodie thought as she left the sheltered back door of the nightclub.

A burst of laughter came from the parking lot as she passed by, and Brodie shivered. Sometimes she was afraid of the people who frequented the nightclub.

"And sometimes you're afraid of your shadow, too," she mocked herself. But she increased her pace.

Another burst of laughter, and Brodie's heart started to race. She risked a glance over her shoulder and saw the

three rowdies. They were half a block behind her, and the hotel was two blocks ahead.

"Hey, honey!" one of them called. "How's about a little drink, now that you're off duty?"

Brodie thought about breaking into a run, but she was already walking as fast as she could in those absurdly high heels.

A hand on her arm brought a strangled scream to her lips. "Well, now, isn't she a pretty baby, up close?" It was the ringleader. "How about a little kiss, Brodie?"

"Leave me alone," she said.

"Just a little kiss for Max," he wheedled.

Brodie stared up at him in horror as he bent his head, but panic gave her strength, and she pushed him away.

His eyes narrowed. "What's the matter?" he asked, and his hand tightened on her arm.

"Let her go, Max." The voice was firm.

"Well, if it isn't the Perry Mason of Hammond's Point," Max said. "Do you want to join the fun?"

Drew took a step closer. "It won't be a joke if Miss McKenzie files assault charges, Max. You're still on probation, aren't you?"

Max's hand dropped to his side. "All right, Hammond, you made your point," he growled. He and his two companions faded off down a nearby alley.

Brodie started to tremble violently. She clung to Drew's arm until they reached the hotel, and said, "Thanks, Drew." It was a feeble croak.

"I'm coming up."

"I can't take a man to my room!"

"This hotel has no security. There could be any number of thugs waiting for you in the hallway."

She shuddered and didn't argue anymore. Every shadow on the dimly lighted stairs seemed to hide another Max.

On the third floor, she unlocked the door of her dingy room and turned to him. "I won't be so careless again, Drew. Thanks for rescuing me."

But he pushed the door open and followed her in.

"You can't be in here, Drew," she pointed out. "The hotel's rules..."

"And who's going to stop me?" he asked. "That's the whole point. Damn it, Brodie, don't you understand the danger you're in?" He gave the door a shove, and then bent to examine the flimsy lock.

"Do you need to take anything with you tonight? Or can we pick it all up tomorrow?"

"What do you mean?" She turned in the centre of the room, puzzled by his question.

"I'm taking you home to Safe Harbour, that's what. Come on, Bro. Get your things."

DREW SLAMMED the car door and strode across the concrete to the back entrance.

Brodie followed, looking up at the solid walls, the heavy timbers, the brown brick of Safe Harbour. It's my anchor in a crazy world, she thought.

She followed Drew down the hall.

He said quietly, "Go into the draw-

ing room and sit down, Brodie. I'll be there in a minute."

She ignored the comfortable chairs and chose to sit bolt upright on the bench in front of the grand piano. She stared at the elegant furnishings, at the intricate pattern of the Oriental rug, at the oil portrait of Drew's mother that hung above the fireplace.

"Brodie?"

He had come in so quietly that she jumped when he spoke. He leaned on the back of a chair and looked at her for a long time, as if unsure of what came next. "Daniel was right," he said, finally. "I have been thinking of getting married."

Brodie looked down at her hands, clenched so tight that her nails were cutting her palms.

"Brodie," he said softly, "will you marry me?"

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BRODIE FELT as if the piano bench was sliding out from under her. For a moment she thought she hadn't heard right. And then, as she looked up at him, she saw the deadly serious expression in his green eyes.

"We've both been hurt by people we cared very much about, Bro. Yours is a fresh wound, and it's hard for you to look ahead. But it will heal."

"You once said there's never again a love like the first one," she reminded him.

"That's true. It leaves scars, but there are other important things in life, Brodie. There is still affection—and friendship."

Marry someone she didn't love?

Live—for always—with someone who wasn't Jerry?

"Perhaps a marriage where the friendship comes first might be quieter," Drew went on, "but to tell you the truth, that's exactly what I want, Brodie. A comfortable marriage—call it a partnership! No emotional storms, no—" He stopped suddenly.

Brodie wondered what kind of temper tantrums Cynthia had treated him to.

He went on. "You must see, now that we know Jerry is engaged to Isabel Fanning, you have some choices to make. Options that don't include Jerry."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"You could choose to be bitter about Jerry, or you can look around for a second choice."

She forced a smile. "It isn't very flattering to you, Drew. Don't you want more than being second choice?"

He was silent for a time, as if thinking about it. Then he said, "I don't want to spend my life alone, Brodie. We've both been hurt almost beyond bearing, by people who didn't love us as much as we loved them. Perhaps we can heal together."

"And perhaps we will never heal at all," she said.

"That may be true. But you understand the pain, Bro. No other woman knows me as well." He touched a glossy curl with a gentle fingertip. "Together we can have security—affection—friendship."

"Friendship," she said quietly. "Is that all you're asking for, Drew?"

"For now," he said.

"Would you want children?" she said, very softly.

There was a long silence. "I think I'd regret never having a child."

Colour stained her cheeks. "I can't promise..."

"I'm not asking for promises, Brodie. I know you can't be sure now how you'll feel in a year or two. But I won't press you. Until the time comes that you choose differently, Bro, we will go on as friends. The only difference will be that piece of paper that makes it legal."

"What if—" her voice broke—"what if I never change my mind?"

He smiled, very gently. "Then we will still be friends."

She was quiet for a long time and then she asked wistfully, "Will that be enough for us, Drew?"

He shrugged. "It's more than either of us will have alone." He reached for her hand. "Bro, if you find a man you care about, one who can make you forget Jerry and find that breathless love again—then I'll let you go. No questions, no arguments."

He tilted her chin. "What about it, Brodie? Shall we reach out for the comfort we might find together—or shall we walk through life in tight little knots, waiting for the supreme happiness to seek us out?"

BRODIE STOOD by the gothic window that overlooked the tiny second-floor terrace and stared out at the formal gardens.

"Why can't life be so neatly ar-

ranged?" she asked, and let herself drift off for a moment into the perfect world of her imagination.

She had asked for time to think, and Drew had not pressed for an immediate answer. He had ruffled her hair as he said goodnight, and now he was peacefully asleep.

It didn't seem fair, that he slept while she paced the floor. But Drew never lay awake to entertain doubts and fears, even when the deliberations of a jury hung over his head. Cool, logical, and perfectly sensible. That was Drew.

Well, if she did agree to marry him, she certainly knew what she was getting into, Brodie told herself, and then shook her head in disbelief. She actually sounded as if she was taking this thing seriously.

He was right about one thing, however. She had to begin looking at what she could do with her life without Jerry. Her college classes had been aimed at making her a professional singer. She was trained for nothing. Much as she despised formal education, she could go back to school next fall and study anything she wanted. If, she reminded herself, Drew was still willing to pay her tuition.

So the important question really was, what did she want to do?

The answer came as a negative, and it startled her. "I don't want to leave Safe Harbour," she murmured.

Why shouldn't she do as Drew asked? There would be no Jerry in her life, and no one could ever take his place. Perhaps Drew was right. Perhaps together they could find some semblance of happiness.

I do not want to spend my life alone, she thought, any more than Drew does.

Brodie had never thought about Drew as a man, only as a pseudo-uncle. Janet had thought him handsome, but far more important to Brodie was his generosity, his kindness. They were friends; they would be companions. That was all, unless someday—

Her mind still spinning, she finally tumbled into bed, only to dream of Jerry. She was walking down the church aisle to meet him on Drew's arm. As she reached the altar rail Jerry stepped forward and said sternly, "Where's the money, Brodie? Let's count the money first, and then we'll have the wedding." When she shook her head, his face changed and his mouth opened in a snarl. Brodie started to scream.

She found herself moments later clutching the sleeve of Drew's battered old green bathrobe, her face buried in his shoulder. Finally she sniffed weakly and relaxed.

I must get him a new bathrobe for his birthday, she thought vaguely. "Thanks for coming in," she said.

His voice was gruff. "I will always come when you call, Bro. Always."

THE MORNING SUN was pouring across her bed when she woke. Brodie stretched lazily and then remembered the night before. "I must give him an answer," she thought.

She left a note for Mrs Riley and started down the hill towards the law office, heels tapping on the pavement,

head ringing with the question, "What am I going to tell Drew?"

When Brodie came in, he was leaning over Sue's desk with a contract she was working on. He looked up with a smile, but Brodie could see strain around his eyes.

"I came to work," she said. "You did say I could have my job back."

"Hallelujah," Sue said.

"I want to talk to Brodie, Sue," Drew told her. "Then you can put her to work."

The oak door closed behind them with a refined click.

"So you want a job," he said.

Brodie knew the room was sound-proof, but she dropped her voice anyway. "And you want an answer."

"It would be helpful." He smiled.

Brodie perched on the edge of a chair. "Then—yes. With one condition."

His smile seemed to freeze. "Which is?"

"You said that if I fell in love again—you'd let me go. The same applies to you. If you want out—"

"That won't happen, Brodie."

"I'm scared, Drew," she whispered.

He put a hand on her chin, and tipped her face up so he could look at her. "To tell you the truth, I'm a little scared too," he admitted. "It's an unusual thing we're doing—"

"'Crazy' might be a better word for it."

"Shall we go and look at rings this morning?"

Brodie froze. It would be torture to sit again in the little office at Brooke's Jewellery.

"I don't want an engagement ring," she said.

Drew didn't seem surprised. "Very well, Bro. I think we should be married right away."

"People will talk," she warned.

"They'll talk more if we give them time. This way, once the shock is past, there won't be anything to talk about."

"Very well."

"I'll make the arrangements. In the meantime," Drew continued, "the fewer people who know..."

"I can't think of anyone I want to tell," Brodie said.

He reached for her hand, and she met his eyes. "Bro," he said softly, "thank you. I am honoured."

"No promises," she reminded him.

SUE HAD SET her to work at the filing cabinets. "It seems I never have time to catch up on these things," she said. "We really need another full-time paralegal in this office."

Brodie slipped another document back into its proper file. "What does a paralegal do, anyway?"

"Oh, pretty much what an attorney does. We have to work under supervision, of course."

"I thought you were just a secretary."

"That's how I got started. But with on-the-job training, there are more things I can handle. Estates, wills, interviewing clients—"

Brodie shrugged. "Drew once told me that law school just taught you which book to look in. But I'm not sure he meant it," she added.

Sue would have pushed it, but Oliver Fanning came in just then, with Isabel trailing behind him. "I need to see Drew," he announced in a loud voice.

Sue smiled politely. "I'll see if I can fit you in, Mr Fanning."

Isabel wandered over to Brodie. "Do you have a new job? It must not be very exciting, after being a singer."

"Perhaps not, but I meet a nicer class of people," Brodie returned sweetly.

"I saw you last night at the club. Jerry's my fiancé, you know," Isabel added ingenuously.

"I gathered that."

"That's what we came in for. Daddy wants to talk to Mr Hammond about the prenuptial agreements."

Drew opened his door, and Oliver Fanning said, "You just wait out here, Isabel."

At least he's doing something to protect her from Jerry, Brodie thought. "When is the wedding?" she asked.

"In three weeks. Daddy's giving us a trip to Jamaica for a wedding gift. My dress is being custom-made. And—" Isabel prattled on for several minutes.

The pile of documents started to slide off the table, and both girls grabbed for them. Isabel's sleeve slipped, and Brodie saw a shadow on her arm. It looked like the mark of fingerprints.

Isabel saw her glance at it, and quickly pulled the sleeve into place.

It's none of my business, Brodie told herself uneasily. I don't know that Jerry made those marks. But—

"Isabel," she said, very softly, "be careful. Don't let yourself be hurt."

Oliver Fanning reappeared in the door of Drew's office, his voice booming. "We'll see you next week then for the signing, Drew—Jerry and Isabel and I."

Isabel was another one to whom the news of Brodie's marriage would come as a shock, she thought. And Jerry? Just what would Jerry think?

THE STONE CHURCH was cool this morning, despite the June heat, and the worshippers who crowded the seats. Brodie tried to keep her mind on the service, but her thoughts kept skipping back to the simple ceremony in the chapel just a few minutes before, the brief words that had made her Drew's wife.

I am actually married, she kept repeating to herself. Those few words, and I'm now Brodie Hammond.

I certainly don't feel married, she thought, looking down at the intricately carved gold band on her left hand. Drew had chosen it.

She raised a slim hand to the trinket that gleamed against her throat. She hadn't told him that she would not wear a diamond, and so this morning he had given her a full-carat solitaire on a gold chain.

He seemed to be concentrating on the pastor's words, and so she studied him covertly for a few moments, almost as if she had never seen him before.

Love, honour, and cherish, she thought. Well, honour would present no problem. And cherish—she could

certainly do that. Two out of three isn't bad, she told herself wryly.

"I'd like to take a moment before our service ends," the pastor said, "to introduce two people who are not new to this church, but who have a new status in our community—Mr and Mrs Drew Hammond, who were married this morning in our chapel."

Brodie could feel the astonishment sweep through the congregation like a tidal wave. The service came to a mercifully quick close, and then they were surrounded in the centre aisle by a chattering crowd. Brodie was speechless but Drew, his arm around her waist, accepted the congratulations, intercepted the questions, sidetracked the speculation with a disarming smile, guiding Brodie toward the exit.

Isabel planted herself in their path. "Well! If you aren't a dark horse, Brodie," she exclaimed. "I'd like you to meet my fiancé, Jerry Whitcomb. Jerry, this is—"

"Brodie," he said, and the word dripped accusation. Then he looked up at Drew. "Hammond, I've half a mind to—"

"Offer us your congratulations?" Drew asked pleasantly, and he steered Brodie to the main door, away from Jerry's accusing eyes.

Her throat was tight with tears. If I could only talk to Jerry, she thought, explain it to him...

Brodie saw Daniel waiting for them on the church steps, and braced herself for his bear hug. But he didn't touch her, and she was vaguely surprised at the coolness in his voice.

Then Drew's hand tightened on her

arm, and he said quietly, "Hello, Cynthia."

Brodie hadn't seen the blonde at Daniel's elbow. She had to look up a couple of inches to meet Cynthia's eyes, as hard and purple as amethyst.

Ten years had not been kind to Cynthia Tandy, whose attention was on Drew. "It's so nice to see you again," she breathed huskily.

"Will you be staying long?" Drew asked. Brodie's heart went out to him. To come suddenly face to face with her after all these years—the pain must be agonising.

"A few weeks at least. I wanted Eric to get to know Uncle Daniel better. You knew I had a son, Drew? He's eight now."

"Yes," he said quietly. "Daniel had told me. You remember Brodie, don't you, Cynthia?"

"How could I forget? She was always underfoot," the blonde said. "We really must catch up on old times, Drew. Come to dinner at Daniel's one day this week?" She laid a hand on his lapel and smiled.

Brodie held her breath. Surely he'd turn the invitation down. But Drew said, "Of course we'll come, Cynthia. Name the day."

Damn Cynthia, Brodie thought bleakly. If she had to show up at all, why today? And damn Daniel, she added to herself. Some partner—without even the decency to warn Drew.

Nobody ever said this was going to be easy, she told herself crossly. She knew the odds. But throw Cynthia into the deal, and suddenly all bets were off.

SHE WAS WEARING her new coffee-coloured dress, and the diamond necklace twinkled just above the deep neckline. She half-expected Drew to comment, but he merely looked her over gravely. Daniel, though, displayed a reluctant twinge of approval as he opened the door. "Cynthia's not down yet," he said.

When you're over thirty, it takes longer to make yourself look eighteen, Brodie thought cattily.

"Have a drink in the meantime?" he asked, and ushered them out onto the patio.

When Cynthia arrived, she accepted the martini Daniel handed her with a grateful sigh. "To old friends," she said, raising the glass and looking at Drew. "I don't know what I would have done if it hadn't been for Hammond's Point, Drew. Just to be able to come back here rests my soul in this terrible time."

What terrible time was Cynthia suffering, Brodie wondered. She looked great tonight. The evening light was far more flattering, her dress a spot of brilliant flame-red.

"Uncle Daniel has invited Eric and me to stay all summer, if we like. The separation has been such a blow to Eric, you know, but now that I've actually filed for divorce..."

Divorce? Brodie's glass was suddenly heavy in her hand. Cynthia was getting a divorce?

She turned to look at Drew, and watched as he raised his glass, and took a long drink. Had he known?

Brodie's head was whirling. If Drew's first love will soon be free, she wondered, where does that leave me?

THE WEEK dragged on, and slid into another. The case that Drew was trying finished with a victory. One day later he was back in court, and this trial absorbed most of his waking hours. He was always gone when Brodie woke, and he stayed at the office till late at night. There was no time to talk to him. In any case, Brodie wasn't certain what it was she wanted to say. She only knew that she was desperately unhappy just now, and thought he must be feeling even worse.

The weekend would bring Isabel's wedding day—the social event of the season, even if the invitations had been mailed just two weeks in advance.

I cannot sit in that church and watch, Brodie told herself on Friday afternoon, as she sat at her desk, trying to work on a case file. I cannot observe calmly while the man I love marries another woman.

But she knew she would. There was no excuse big enough to convince Drew that she couldn't go.

"What is the matter with you?" Sue asked, late in the afternoon. "You look like a ghost today."

"I'm just tired of working on this case file." Brodie put the earplug down. "It seems to go on forever."

"Everything has its boring side, Brodie. The law is no exception." Sue indicated the document she was proof-reading. "This is the sixth time we've written Isabel's prenuptial agreement, because Mr Fanning keeps changing his mind."

"He'd better make a decision soon,

if the wedding is still going to be tomorrow."

"Oh, I fully expect to be running down the aisle beside Isabel with a fountain pen in my hand," Sue said.

"I'm a little surprised that Drew didn't insist on me signing something before we married," Brodie mused.

"The cases aren't even similar," Sue said.

"No." At least I'm not a fortune-hunter, Brodie told herself. Why is it, she wondered, that I know with every ounce of my intelligence that Jerry is bad news, yet I still love him?

"He doesn't have much to recommend him, does he?" Sue asked idly. "No money, and from what I hear, not a lot of potential. Whereas you have all sorts of possibilities, and the money to carry you through. Lucky girl."

"Drew's money, you mean."

"No. I mean your trust fund."

"Not you, too," Brodie said curtly. "Everybody in town thinks my father left me a fortune."

"I'm talking about the trust fund Andy Hammond set up for you," Sue said gently.

The room suddenly seemed to change colour around Brodie, and she clenched her hands on the edge of the desk.

Sue didn't notice. She continued to scan the neatly typed lines of the prenuptial agreement as she said, "He wanted you to be independent."

Why had Drew never told her what his father had done? Brodie held on to her remaining poise and said, "I never did understand trusts, Sue. Would you explain that one to me?"

Sue looked thoughtful. "It was pretty standard stuff, Brodie. You start getting the interest when you're twenty-one, the money itself in several payments starting when you're twenty-five or thirty. There's a copy around here somewhere."

I wouldn't bet on it, Brodie thought. "And in the meantime, Drew could take money out of it for my education, I suppose?"

Sue nodded. "And anything else you needed. It was pretty liberal about that."

"Then perhaps it's all been spent."

The secretary smiled. "I hardly think that would be possible." She glanced at the clock. "It's after five. Go on home, Brodie. I have to stay till the Fannings and Jerry Whitcomb get here, but there's no need for you to stay."

SHE WAITED for him till midnight, sitting in the dimly lit library. By the time the car lights swept past the windows, signalling her that Drew was home, Brodie almost ran to the door, determined to have this out as soon as possible.

But the man on the back doorstep was not Drew. "Jerry!" she breathed. "What are you doing here?"

"Had to see you," he said, pushing past her into the kitchen.

"You can't come in. Drew said he'd throw you out if you came here again."

"He has to catch me first." Jerry's voice had an odd timbre to it. "He's still down at his office burning the midnight oil. Brodie, I can't stand it

anymore!" He came toward her, arms outstretched.

Brodie dodged away from him.

"I hate to be away from you—I miss holding you, and kissing you. I go to sleep every night dreaming of making love to you. Brodie, say you still love me."

It was everything she had wanted him to say, and yet—"I'm married, Jerry." Her voice was dull.

"So will I be, tomorrow. It doesn't have to matter, Brodie. We were made for each other."

"If you had said those things a month ago—"

"I was stupid," he said and caught her in his arms. She could smell alcohol on his breath.

"Where have you been, Jerry?"

"At my bachelor party," he said, and kissed her throat. "It suddenly dawned on me—everything I'm giving up. If I could have you, Brodie, it wouldn't bother me at all."

"I'm flattered," she muttered. "Jerry, let me go."

"We both know this marriage of yours was a stunt to make me jealous. All right, I admit it—it worked. But I can't stand it anymore, Brodie. Get rid of him!"

"What about Isabel?" she asked quietly.

"It's you I want. Isabel means nothing to me, Brodie. She's a meal ticket for us, that's all."

She felt ill. "I wonder how I ever convinced myself that I loved you, Jerry," she said quietly.

"Because you do," he said, with delight in his eyes, and nuzzled her throat.

"All this time I've told myself that under your hard shell there was a charming little boy, who needed only love," Brodie mused. "I didn't realise that you had no conscience or concern about other people."

He scowled. "Brodie," he protested, "that's unkind. The things I've done have all been for us!"

"Including your pursuit of Isabel Fanning?"

He shrugged. "We have to live somehow."

"Have you ever heard of working?"

Jerry pressed close to her. "Brodie, my darling—" His lips were hot against her throat.

The back door opened, but it was several moments before Drew spoke. "Isn't this a fascinating little party," he said. In two strides he had crossed the room, and his left hand clamped on to Jerry's shoulder, pulling him away from Brodie. His right fist connected with Jerry's chin, and Brodie watched him fall. But her gaze was focused on Drew.

He glanced down at his grazed hand, and said harshly, "Go to your room, Brodie."

"No." Her refusal to leave was definite.

"Get out of here. He's been spoiling for this."

"He's drunk, Drew."

"That's no excuse for his behaviour."

"It certainly isn't for yours, either."

His green eyes were fierce. "As long as we're talking about behaviour,

we'll discuss yours as soon as I've finished with Mr Whitcomb here."

"You can't beat up on a drunken man, Drew!"

"If you don't like it, you aren't required to watch."

She seized his arm, neither of them watching as Jerry crept to his feet. Brodie saw him first, as he picked up a heavy glass fruit bowl.

"Watch out, Drew!" she shrieked.

Drew wheeled and his forearm caught Jerry's, spinning the bowl to the floor in a million fragments. This time Drew's fist drove into Jerry's stomach. As Jerry went down, his head thudded against a cabinet door.

The silence in the room was complete for the first few seconds. Then Jerry's eyes fluttered open, and Brodie slowly released the breath she had been holding.

Drew's eyes were humourless. "Your prayers have been answered, my dear," he said. "I doubt that I've even hurt him. He may think tomorrow that he has an unusually bad hangover, but he's probably used to that."

Brodie's voice was low and tight. "As far as I'm concerned, you can both go to hell." She fought off tears as she ran up the stairs.

She was shaking so hard that she could scarcely close the door, and she stood in the centre of her room trembling. There had been murder in Drew's eyes, and she had been terrified.

Finally her nerves calmed and she shakily descended the stairs.

Drew was in the library, staring out the window at the dark garden. She

stood in the doorway for several minutes before he turned.

"If you're looking for the boyfriend, he left."

"I thought he was you, when he drove in. I would never have opened the door if I'd known it was Jerry."

He didn't answer.

"I swear I'm telling the truth, Drew!"

Still there was silence. He had turned back to the window.

She picked up the black king from the chess set at her elbow and threw it at him. "Damn it, Drew, will you listen to me?"

He turned then. "Why should I, Brodie? You can tell me whatever you want in that sweet little voice of yours—about how you didn't invite him or want him here. And I still won't believe it."

Brodie swallowed hard. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," she said, then crossed the hall and started up the stairs.

"I think I'm being very reasonable," he said as he followed her.

"I didn't invite him here," she whispered. She retreated against the wall at the head of the staircase.

"But you certainly let him hold you, didn't you?" He braced his hands on the wall above her, then let them slide slowly down her arms. "Like this, Brodie? And I'm sure he kissed you."

"I tried to stop him," she breathed.

"As you're trying to stop me now?" he asked, very softly, against the pulse that beat wildly at the base of her throat. His lips were gentle as he nibbled her earlobe. "Is that how you tried to stop him?"

"I did try," she whispered.

"And then did he do this?" Drew's hand slid down to cup her breast for a moment, and then his long fingers began to unbutton her blouse. In moments he was toying with the creamy skin that peeked out from the lacy cup of her bra.

"No," she said, but her voice trembled.

Drew's mouth found hers, and the contact was scorching. "How far has it gone, Brodie?" he asked, his voice very soft. "Have you been to bed with him yet, or is that treat still ahead of us all?"

"Drew—"

His eyes were blazing. "If I'm going to give my name to your first-born child, Brodie, then I'd like for there to be a chance that it's actually mine. That seems fair, doesn't it?" He picked her up and carried her to her bed. He tossed her down into the middle of the bed and stood for a moment looking at her. Then he was beside her.

"Drew—"

"I'm glad you remember my name," he said, against her lips. He had pinned her down to the bed, with the length of his body holding her there, helpless. He toyed with her, but his mouth was harsh as it moved across her throat, her cheek, then returned to her lips.

My God, he means to go through with this, she thought, and panic threatened to choke her. "Not like this, Drew. Oh, my God, Drew, not like this!" she gasped.

He tensed and Brodie held her breath. Then he sighed.

"No," he said, very quietly. "Not like this." His fingers brushed her cheek and her slender arm.

Then he was gone, and she was alone.

SLEEP ELUDED HER. Whenever she closed her eyes, she could again feel the heat of Drew's hands caressing her body, and she would sit up straight, wide-eyed, looking around to be certain that she was alone.

Not even Drew could always be trusted. For Brodie, it was a bitter admission. She had never suspected that he was capable of violence; for Drew there had always been a peaceable way to settle every problem.

She pushed back the blankets and paced the floor for what seemed hours. If she hadn't let Jerry come in, she thought—that's where the problem started. Or was it when she had gone back down to talk to Drew?

No matter what he said, she could not stay here now. Safe Harbour was no longer a sanctuary, if she was not protected in her own bedroom.

"And you're no longer a child, either," she told herself firmly. "So stop feeling sorry for yourself." You can't be married to one man, and in love with another, and not get into trouble, she thought.

"But I was in love with the idea of being in love," she told herself, without emotion. "Not with Jerry."

She sat down at her dressing table and began to brush her hair, feeling that she must do something with her hands or start to throw things.

She supposed that she should feel

shocked at her own stupidity in getting involved with Jerry. But she felt only emptiness.

Even the half-life that Drew had offered was denied to her now. "I could never trust him again," she said, "after what happened tonight."

But nothing had happened, her other self argued. Drew could have overpowered her, but he hadn't. The merest word of protest from her had restored the Drew she knew and loved.

Loved? Her breath came in a harsh gasp, and her hand clenched on the handle of the brush. Loved?

"I love him as a brother," she said to her white-faced reflection. "As an uncle—as a father—"

But as a husband? She shook her head, but the ghost in the mirror seemed unmoved by her protest.

Then why did you marry him? The question ricocheted around the room.

"Because I was lonely," she said, "and afraid to go out in the world by myself. Because I wanted to please him and make him happy—"

And isn't that what love is? Wanting his happiness, even at the cost of your own?

"No," she protested. "Love is more than that. It's that crazy, giddy feeling that makes the world look rosy. It's wanting to be with someone so much that nothing else matters. Love—real love lasts forever. That's the kind of feeling I had for Jerry—"

But it wasn't, she admitted painfully. And it hadn't lasted, once she had seen Jerry for what he really was.

She planted her elbows on the dressing table. "Love is working to-

gether, and making a home, and having children and building a life—" This was dangerous ground, she told herself. "Love has to include passion," she said firmly, delighted to have talked herself out of this ridiculous notion. Being in love with Drew—indeed!

"If there isn't that spark of physical desire, that hunger to be a part of the other person, then it isn't really love." That was simple enough, she decided. And that was what was missing from her feelings for Drew.

She got back into bed, but the instant her eyes closed, she could feel the warmth of his hands again, the taste of his kisses.

A footstep sounded just outside her door. She sat up straight, eyes wide.

"Brodie?" His voice was a whisper. "Are you awake?"

She held her breath. There was a long silence, and then his steps faded away down the hall, and his bedroom door closed with a gentle click.

It was oddly final. She knew, somehow, that he would not be coming back. Brodie released her breath in a sigh, and lay back, tears streaming down her face.

The passion was there, she knew, finally admitting what her heart had known for weeks—perhaps for much longer. When she thought of Drew now, it was as a lover.

She had protested, tonight, when he had tried to make love to her, but if he had come to her in gentleness, she would have welcomed him. "Because I love him," she murmured, and pressed her hands against hot cheeks.

Love, she thought with sudden new

awareness; "It's sharing the pain as well as the joy," she said. "It's sharing, and caring, and fighting, and playing—all those things that I want to spend my life doing..." She hesitated. "With Drew," she whispered, and wished that she had not protested and sent him away. If she had held him, and been gentle, she would be his wife in fact, sharing with him a relationship that even Cynthia could never share...

Cynthia. In the emotional storm that she had been battling, Brodie had forgotten about Cynthia, and about why she had been waiting in the library for Drew to come home.

She slid out of bed and curled up on the window seat, staring out over the city lights. She tried to feel again the hurt she had felt when Sue had told her about the trust fund. It would have to be settled, though.

And if her suspicions were right, if there was no fund, and he had married her so that missing money could be concealed, then—"I don't want to know," she whispered.

Love is wanting so much for him to be happy that you're willing to sacrifice your own happiness. But if his happiness meant that she must set him free to marry Cynthia...

"I can't do it," Brodie said. "I can't let him go, now."

When three o'clock came, she rose, stretched muscles stiffened by the long night, and went to find him.

The big front bedroom was quiet, and dark except for the moonlight that trickled in.

"Why did you come here, Bro?" he asked softly.

Brodie crossed the room. "This is something I have to do."

He raised himself on one elbow. "Brodie, don't you understand?" he said. "I tried to rape you. You don't owe me anything, my dear—not after that."

"Perhaps it's something that I owe myself, Drew." She stood there in the moonlight, feeling gauche. Then she whispered, "Will you make love to me now?"

"Why, Brodie?"

She sat down on the edge of the bed and reached out to touch his face. "I don't want to talk tonight, Drew. Please—"

There was a long silence, then, "God help me," he said quietly, "but I am not strong enough to send you away." He held out a hand.

Brodie crept into his arms. "I'm afraid," she whispered.

"You needn't be," he said. His hands were gentle, his mouth tender as he caressed her. Her first sensation was surprise, and then wonder, as a flicker of passion kindled deep within her and grew to a flame.

I never, never expected it to be like this, she thought. I can't be alone in feeling this way. And she knew with her last coherent thought that Drew shared every instant of ecstasy and triumph as they reached together for the heights, and drifted back down to earth.

"Still nothing to say?" he murmured finally, his lips warm against the curve of her throat.

Brodie shook her head. What could there be to talk about, she wondered. Their bodies had said it all so well.

Drew drifted off to sleep then, his face buried in her hair, and a kind of exhausted peace dropped over her—the peace that comes to a woman when she has fought her last battle, and surrendered.

BUT PEACEFULNESS FLED with the morning light, as Brodie stirred, remembered and was horrified by what she had done.

Drew still slept, sprawled on his back with one arm flung up over his head.

I must have been crazy, she thought, to have done such a thing. There was still the trust fund, there was still Cynthia. All Brodie had done was to complicate things.

As if sleeping together could be the answer to anything! She inched out of the bed, holding her breath, and went to the kitchen, drinking coffee until her nerves began to unravel.

The clock edged on, and still Drew did not appear. When less than an hour remained till Isabel's wedding would begin, she poured his coffee and went upstairs.

When the hiss of water in the shower died abruptly, she called, "Drew? Don't forget the wedding is at ten."

"I'll be there in a minute."

She left his coffee on the bedside table and retreated to her room. Suddenly it seemed very important that she looked her best today; she chose a mustard-coloured dress. It draped around her slender figure and made a perfect background for the diamond necklace. She hurried through her

make-up, tucked her hair up in a twist, and added a wide-brimmed ivory straw hat. It made her look older and more elegant, she thought. And the brim shaded her face, making it difficult for anyone to read her thoughts.

Drew was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. Her heart twisted as she saw him there. He was as handsome as she had ever seen him, in a well-tailored light grey suit.

It was just a block from Safe Harbour to the grey stone church, and the bells were already pealing joyfully as they went indoors. It took Brodie's eyes a moment to adjust, but as she saw the banks of flowers on the altar, and the candles already burning, it seemed for the first time to be real. Jerry and Isabel were actually going to be married today.

"Dearly beloved," the minister said, and Brodie closed her eyes, losing herself in memories of her own wedding day, little more than two weeks ago. Then she had paid scant attention to the majestically simple words. Now she let them flow over her, drinking in the ages-old magic that melded two separate people into one.

Long before she was expecting it, the organ pealed forth again, and Jerry and Isabel came back down the aisle. Someone had once told Brodie that every bride was beautiful on her wedding day, and she realised abruptly how true it was of Isabel. I wonder, Brodie thought, if I was beautiful too. I hope Isabel is still wearing that look in a year, she thought.

"Are you all right?" Drew murmured.

She nodded.

"I know how hard this is for you. I don't want to make it any harder—"

Cynthia linked her arm in Drew's. "Quite a splash, wasn't it?" she said cheerfully.

Brodie kept her head down.

Daniel pulled Drew aside. "How is the trial going?" he asked, and they stepped off to the side to talk about it.

"You look dejected, little one," Cynthia added. "Is it because you weren't asked to sing? Or are you sorry that Isabel's wedding, and not yours, was the social event of the year? You shouldn't be."

"I'm not," Brodie denied softly.

Cynthia wasn't convinced. "This one can't last, you know. And just think how embarrassed Isabel will be when the marriage breaks up before she's written her thank-you cards."

"You can't know that," Brodie pointed out. "They might be very happy together."

"Are you offering odds?" Then Cynthia returned to the attack. "At least you'll be spared that. A quiet wedding, a quiet divorce, and it will be just as if it never happened."

Brodie looked up then. "And what makes you think Drew and I will get a divorce?"

Cynthia laughed. "Drew married you out of desperation, so that I wouldn't think he was still in love with me. It was rather charming of him—like a small boy trying to hide. But the moment he found out that I'll soon be free, you didn't stand a chance, Brodie."

"You're very certain of yourself."

"Of course. Oh, I realise that it may

take a little while for him to soothe his conscience about you. But I'm in no hurry. He'll come back to me."

"You make it sound inevitable." Brodie tried to keep her voice level. "As if I have nothing to say about it."

"You don't, honey. Admit it. You can't hold a man who doesn't want to be held." Her eyes were cold.

I'm certainly going to try, Brodie told herself.

*

THEY WERE brave words. But in the next few days, Brodie could find no way to make them work. The silence inside Safe Harbour deepened, until even the house itself seemed sullen and withdrawn.

Brodie was giving a piano lesson to Sue's daughter on a Wednesday afternoon, when a summer thunderstorm threatened.

"Try it again," she told the child, and braced herself to listen to "Three Blind Mice" for the fourth time that afternoon.

Mrs Riley came down the hall. "Your friend Isabel is here," she said. "I put her in the morning room."

Brodie thought for a moment that she'd misheard. "Isabel was going to Jamaica for a week," she said.

"I don't know about that. I just know she's here, now."

"Offer her a cup of tea. I'll be there in a minute." Brodie assigned her pupil's next lesson, rewarded her with a biscuit fresh from Mrs Riley's oven, and waved goodbye from the front

door as the little figure, in raincoat and tall boots, started for home. Then she went to the morning room.

Isabel was gazing out the curved bay window. She was wearing dark glasses, and what Brodie could see of her face was pale.

Brodie waited quietly while Mrs Riley arranged the tea trolley. Then she said, "Thank you. I'll pour."

Isabel hadn't seemed to hear her come in, but when the door had closed behind the housekeeper, she said, "You knew what would happen, didn't you?"

Brodie was honestly confused. "Knew what, Isabel?"

"Just do me one favour, Brodie. Don't say, 'I told you so'—all right?" Without waiting for an answer she turned and pulled off the dark glasses.

Brodie gasped. Isabel's left eye was swollen nearly shut, the lid purple. The bruising extended down the side of the girl's face and back into her hair.

"That's not all," Isabel said curtly. She pushed up her sleeve to show another bruise, and clutched at her side, as if taking a deep breath hurt her.

"Your ribs, too?" Brodie asked quietly.

Isabel nodded grimly. "I think one may be broken."

"Then perhaps you'd better not have any tea until you've seen a doctor."

"It happened three days ago, Brodie. I've been eating ever since—when I felt like it."

"It didn't all happen three days ago," Brodie said quietly. The bruises were in all stages of healing; this had been no isolated incident.

Isabel winced. "No. The eye was last night—and when he went out to the beach this morning, I packed up and ran. I may be dumb, Brodie, but I don't have to be my husband's punching bag."

"You certainly don't." Brodie sat down. "I don't mean to sound rude, Isabel, but why did you come to me?"

"Because you really seemed to care that day when you saw the bruise on my arm. Besides, I didn't want to walk into Mr Hammond's office looking like this."

"Drew is in court. I don't know when he'll be home, and I think you need medical care, Isabel."

"Well, give me a cup of tea and we'll talk about it." She sat down. "I'm going to get an annulment, of course."

Brodie picked up a cup and saucer. "Have you talked to your father?"

"No. Would you call him? I'm so scared of him."

"I think it would be better if you called." Brodie set her cup down. "Would you like me to leave you alone?" She left the room as Isabel reluctantly reached for the telephone.

A few minutes later, Isabel came to find her. "It's all right," she said. "Daddy's going to call the doctor, and meet me at the hospital, Brodie!" The

girl seemed to relax. Then she gave Brodie an impulsive hug, and was gone.

THE STORM BURST furiously over Hammond's Point, and then, in the manner of summer thunderstorms, it passed by, leaving the air cool and crisp.

Brodie was sitting on the terrace, sipping iced tea, when Drew came home. She was surprised when the Lincoln pulled into the drive, for she hadn't expected him to be home for dinner at all.

When he reached the drawing room, he poured himself a glass of wine from the trolley, and joined her outside. He looked tired. "The trial is over," he said.

"How did it turn out?" Brodie asked.

"They offered a settlement right before the case went to the jury. My client took it."

"That's good. But all that time and work wasted.... Drew—how hard is it to get an annulment?"

The delicate stem of his glass shook in his hand, and wine splashed over the tile floor. Drew swore. "Very difficult," he said finally. "Why do you ask?"

"Isabel is home. She wants out of her marriage."

There was a long silence. "She may have to settle for a divorce," he said. "Bad judgement doesn't make good legal grounds. Would you like more tea?"

"Please." She handed him her

glass and watched as he poured more wine for himself. "So Isabel's fairy-tale marriage lasted less than a week," he said.

"It could have been expected," Brodie said.

"By everyone except Isabel. What happened, anyway?"

"Jerry beat her up."

Drew handed her the icy glass. She was breathlessly aware of his touch. How utterly silly, she thought.

"You're no doubt wondering what she did to provoke him," he suggested coolly.

Brodie's mouth dropped open. "Of course I'm not. Drew, of all the sexist remarks!"

There was dead silence on the terrace for two full minutes. Finally, he sighed. "You're right, Brodie. I deserved that. But when you asked about the annulment, I thought perhaps it was you who wanted it."

Tears rose in her eyes. She dashed them away.

"I understand, Bro," he said gravely. "I am sorry, my dear, for all the hurt I've caused you."

There was a lump in her throat that would have choked her if she had tried to speak.

So this was the way it would end, she thought, and suddenly she could stay calm no longer. She jumped up from her chair. "I can't take another instant of this!" she stormed. Suddenly sobs overtook her, and she fled through the drawing room and up the stairs.

Her room was still and cool. She flung herself across her bed and wept till her pillow was soaked. It was over. Too late, she had discovered what he meant to her, and now he was gone from her.

No, she told herself, and sniffled, that wasn't strictly true. He had always belonged to Cynthia.

Her sobs died slowly and she lay still, her throat aching. She heard the door open.

"Brodie?" He sounded worried.

"Go away!" Her voice was a croak.

"I will not touch you again. I swear it."

She had no strength to fight him, but the tears started again as he sat down in the rocking chair next to her bed.

"Don't cry, darling," he said. "Please don't cry." His voice was so gentle that she wanted to drown in it.

"I did tell you that if it was your wish, I would set you free. Is that what you want?"

She gulped and nodded.

He sighed. "Brodie, I owe you a debt of gratitude. A lot of things have become clear to me this summer."

Cynthia being chief among them, Brodie thought.

"I want us to stay friends, Bro."

"I don't want to be your friend," she choked. If he tells me about how much he loves Cynthia, she thought, I will start screaming. She whispered, hoarsely, "Don't say anything more, please." She swallowed hard.

"It's a dreadful thing to love someone and not be able to have him."

There was an instant of silence, and then he said, "You won't have much longer to wait for Jerry. I doubt he'll contest Isabel's divorce, so you'll soon be able to take up your hobby of reforming him."

She struck back. "I still don't have any money. I have nothing to offer Jerry, remember?"

"Oh, Oliver will have to pay him off. The prenuptial agreement was a generous one. And you won't come out of this marriage penniless, Brodie." His voice was sharp. "Between the two of you, you should be able to keep the wolf from the door."

"As if I'd take your money—" She stared straight at him. "What about my trust fund, Drew?"

"Who told you about that?"

"Does it matter?"

"No." He ran a hand through his hair. "You're right, Brodie. We might as well put all the cards on the table."

"There really is a trust fund?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes. Andy wanted you to be well taken care of, so he put a great deal of his life insurance into trust for you."

"Why wasn't I ever told?"

"I didn't want you to know. The expectation of coming into money does nasty things to kids sometimes. I'd intended to tell you this summer."

"But you told Jerry that I wouldn't get anything—"

"I told him," Drew corrected grimly, "that your father didn't leave you a cent. Which is literally true."

Drew hadn't lied after all, she thought with relief. She sat up. "How much money is there?"

"Of course that would be your first question," he said bitterly. "Half a million, give or take."

"That's a lot of money," Brodie breathed.

"It grows, over twelve years, when it sits idle." He stood up and started to pace the floor. "I wish to hell I had used every penny of it. At least I could have kept you safe from Jerry."

"You didn't use it?" she whispered.

"I never touched it, dammit. I wanted to take care of you, Brodie. You were precious to me, and I wanted to provide for you myself." His jaw tensed. "I've half a mind to fight your damned divorce, Brodie. Maybe someday you'll come to your senses, if I can wait long enough."

"You would only be punishing yourself." She slid off the bed and walked over to the windows.

"There was a time when I thought we might have a chance," he mused. "Why did you come to me that night, Brodie?" Very slowly, he moved toward her.

"It doesn't matter now," she whispered.

"What went wrong that night, my dear?"

She moistened her lips. "Pretending wasn't good enough, Drew."

"I see," he said. "You couldn't forget that I wasn't Jerry."

I didn't try to forget you. The words echoed inside her head. "No, I couldn't," she whispered. I couldn't ignore the fact that you don't love me, Drew, she thought.

"Did you do it to get even with him?" Drew mused.

Her hands were clenched on the back of a chair. "No," she said. "Don't cheapen it—"

"I see," he said quietly. "And now you want to be free so you can go to Jerry."

It would be so easy to nod, but she could not lie to him.

"Don't do it, Brodie," he said. "To go back to Jerry— You can't be that stupid!"

"You dare to say that to me!" she exploded. "When you're the one who's ready to—" She broke off with a sob.

"What am I supposedly ready to do?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"And you want a divorce." He was so close to her that his breath was warm against her cheek.

"I want out," she said. The words seemed to stick in her throat. "I don't care about the trust fund or a divorce settlement or anything. I just want out, Drew!"

"Brodie—look at me. I tried never to hurt you."

She blinked tears away. "But you

have," she said. "My life is in shreds because of you!"

He flinched as if she had slapped him.

"I'm tired of fighting!" she cried. "Go. Go to Cynthia, Drew. That's what you want, so why play these awful games?"

"What if I don't want Cynthia?" he said quietly.

"Don't lie to me!" She was almost screaming. "You knew she was coming back. You must have known."

"Yes, I knew."

"I don't blame you, but I wish you'd been honest! If you'd told me—" She took a deep breath, then went on. "You'll be miserable with Cynthia. Eric is a brat, and she's a liar and a schemer—"

There was a moment of frozen silence. Then Drew said, "Would it matter to you if I was miserable?"

She shook her head defiantly, her long hair swinging, hiding her eyes. "I don't care what you do. It's your life."

He was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Brodie, I haven't much left to lose—" His hand closed on her chin and forced her to look up at him. "You want to be free? Very well. I'm going to kiss you goodbye."

"No." She was breathless with foreboding.

"It's a small thing to ask—a kiss, that's all," he mused.

She looked up into his slate-green eyes, and held her breath, almost hypnotised by the fire she saw there.

Slowly, he bent his head till his mouth brushed hers.

The feather-light contact was like a surge of electric current through Brodie's body. She shivered and let her hands slip slowly through his dark hair to clasp at the back of his neck.

A light flared in Drew's eyes at her surrender, and the next kiss was neither gentle nor hesitant. He pulled her closer till her body was moulded against the hard strength of his. She scarcely noticed as his hand slid under her blouse, caressing her breast.

"Did kissing Jerry ever make you feel like this?"

Brodie shook her head.

"Are you going back to him?"

"No." It was a hoarse croak.

He smiled then, satisfied, and set about kissing her with slow, patient sensuousness. When his arms relaxed, Brodie swayed back against the wall, her eyes closed. Already she regretted that she had let him kiss her.

She forced her eyes to open. "Goodbye, Drew," she said.

"Oh, no, little one," he whispered. "You're not getting away now. There are a lot of things I've been wondering about, Brodie." His voice was light. If anyone had overheard him, Brodie thought dizzily, they'd have thought he was questioning a friendly witness in the courtroom.

"You called my name that night, warning me when Jerry would have hit me. Why?"

"Because I didn't want you to be hurt." She tried to pull his hands away

from her delicate skin, but he merely found new places to caress. "Would you stop?" she pleaded.

"Never," he said firmly, and kissed her again.

"Drew, stop this and talk to me. I can't think when you're kissing me!"

He sighed and reluctantly released her. "All right, Brodie. What do you want to talk about?"

She felt suddenly cold and alone, outside the comfort of his arms. "Cynthia."

"I'd rather talk about us." Then he sighed. "All right."

"Did she break off your engagement years ago because of me?"

"No." He looked down at her. "Oh, it was because of you, all right. But she didn't break it off, I did."

Brodie's head snapped up. "You're joking."

"Thank you, by the way. If it *hadn't* been for you, I'd probably have married her, sold Safe Harbour, moved East..."

"Sold Safe Harbour?" She was horrified.

"I didn't do it," he said defensively. "Don't yell at me. Now that we've disposed of Cynthia as a topic—"

"You said that you could never forget your first love."

"That's true. I never shall, Brodie. You are my first, my only love. Cynthia was a boy's infatuation, and over the years I've felt nothing for her so much as relief that I didn't marry her."

"That's how I feel about Jerry," she admitted softly.

"Then it's all settled." The warmth in his eyes was like a hand stroking her.

She fought it off. "What is settled?" Her head was spinning.

"If you've finally realised that you don't want Jerry anymore..."

"That doesn't necessarily mean that I want you." She saw him wince and tried to soften the blow. "Drew, you've always made my decisions for me. Isn't it time I started doing that for myself?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Please, Bro..."

"I need a few minutes to think," she said. "This is so sudden..."

She left him there, in her room, and wandered through the house and out to the gardens.

Can I believe him? The question nagged at her. For so long, she had accepted that he loved Cynthia. It was hard to believe that his love had died.

Yours did, she reminded herself. You were infatuated with Jerry, and when that burned itself out, you saw your fierce need for Drew.

But why would he need me, she wondered, and bit her lip. Was it that old monster, responsibility, again?

There was the trust fund, she reminded herself. She would be provided for, no matter what Drew did.

She looked up, and saw him in the doorway, standing with one hand high on the brick wall, watching her. From across the garden she could see the

emotions warring. It's fear, she thought. He's actually afraid that I'll leave.

The last doubt in the corner of her mind burned up and she started to run. He met her on the flagstone steps at the edge of the garden, and she flung herself into his arms with a force that staggered him.

"I had to be certain," she said breathlessly. "I could have made another mistake so easily...."

"This is no mistake." His arms tightened, and he lifted her off her feet to kiss her.

"The neighbours will see," she breathed.

"If this sort of thing shocks them, they'd better start looking for a new house," Drew threatened. "Because they're apt to see a lot of it in the future."

"Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"What could I tell you? That I wanted to make love to you so much that it tore me up to pass your room at night? That I wanted you so badly I was afraid of what I'd do?"

"How long have you known?" she whispered.

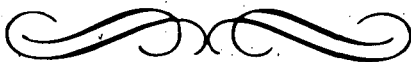
"I think I've always known. But all I could do was wait, and hope that someday you'd fall in love with me."

Brodie giggled. "Is that why you punched Jerry?"

"It was the most satisfying moment of my life. No—there are a few others that were even better." The teasing gleam in his eyes brought hot colour to her face. "Bro—it would have killed me to give you away."

"I'm glad," she whispered. "I love you, Drew. It's because of you that I've always felt protected here."

As they went inside, hand in hand, Safe Harbour seemed to settle down gently around them with a comfortable sigh.



ANNE MARIE DUQUETTE

Anne Marie Duquette's first two Harlequin Romance novels were set in the Colorado Rockies, an area she knows and loves. But she's equally familiar with Arizona, the location of her third story. In fact, while living there, she became fascinated by the Lost Dutchman Mine—which actually exists and which has never yet been found. But it was during the long, evening horseback rides she and her husband took through the Arizona desert that *Adventure of the Heart* really began.

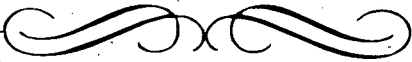


Adventure of the Heart

When Sierra Vaughn hired Adam Copeland as her guide through the Arizona mountains, she had little idea of the perils ahead.

But furious storms and unrelenting heat were only part of the threat. More dangerous by far were Sierra's own feelings toward Adam.





“He’d better be here,” Sierra Vaughn warned the Fates that had conspired against her.

She was hungry, weary, and frustrated. She’d been driving in the Arizona desert all day, the sun was about to set, and she still hadn’t managed to hire a guide.

Finally the dusty road ended. Sierra glanced in the rearview mirror, her blue eyes squinting against the brilliance of the evening sun. Her reflection showed an attractive but shiny face, walnut-colored hair tangled around her shoulders, and mascara that had melted and smudged in the desert heat.

Sierra was a historian specializing in the American Southwest. Her goal was to establish herself as a writer of popular history. But it wasn’t until two years ago, when she teamed up with Tony Miller, another historical writer, that she finally began to make some headway.

She and Tony had met at college, and their association, both professional and social, had lasted through their school days and after graduation.

Sierra and Tony proposed to write a history of Arizona’s Superstition Mountains, focusing on the nineteenth century. This would include retracing the footsteps of Jacob Waltz, also known as “the Dutchman” of the Lost Dutchman Mine fame. The legendary hundred-year-old gold mine, located somewhere in those moun-

tains, was still the subject of speculation and continued to draw treasure hunters.

Not only did the idea sell to a publisher, but they each received a generous advance. It was decided that Tony would do most of the writing, and Sierra would do most of the research and photography.

But unknown to Tony, Sierra had a personal stake in this assignment, too....

She left the rental car and walked toward the camp about fifteen yards ahead.

A slight movement in the dusky interior of a tent caught her eye. She stopped a discreet distance away, and called out the name of her last possible hope for a guide.

“Hello? Adam Copeland?”

The stranger seemed in no hurry to answer, but Sierra knew what she’d seen. Half a minute later a form emerged from the tent.

“I’m Copeland,” he acknowledged, making no move to come closer.

Sierra smiled a polite greeting, noting that he had black hair and bronze skin. The face before her suggested both Mexican and Indian heritage. That wasn’t uncommon in south Arizona. What was uncommon was the tall, rock-hard build, with lean muscle definition that few men possessed. Here was a man who worked hard and

whose way of life definitely agreed with him.

In spite of the unavoidable dustiness of his boots, the rest of him, from his denim jeans to his faded western shirt, was spotless.

"You must be Sierra Vaughn. I understand you're looking for a guide."

"How did you know that?" she asked in surprise.

She was also surprised that his voice had no trace of a Spanish or Indian accent.

Adam shrugged. "Via the grapevine. Don't you know it's dangerous to hike during the monsoon season?"

Sierra hid her irritation at the slight to her intelligence.

"My trip here is job-related, Mr. Copeland. I have deadlines to meet. And what do you mean, monsoon season? I thought monsoons happened only in the Orient."

Adam frowned. "You're misinformed. Southern Arizona has its unique weather patterns. We get heavy rainfall June through August, and the Superstitions can be deadly. That's why I'm not available now. For your own safety, I'd strongly encourage you to wait."

Sierra considered that. She didn't know about the monsoons, but she wasn't afraid of a little rain. Besides, it was only the first week of June.

"If I go into the mountains now, I'll miss the summer heat." Sierra knew that full summer temperatures in the Superstitions could reach well above 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Even now the evening desert air was still in the low hundreds. "I was told you were an excellent guide. With your

knowledge of the local conditions, I'm sure we could avoid any problems."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not keen on drowning."

His words were clearly a dismissal, but Sierra refused to leave.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I get the distinct impression that the weather isn't the *only* reason I can't find a guide." Sierra looked at him suspiciously. "Other people who've wanted guides have been able to hire them. I know, because I've checked. I must have seen every guide for hire in this area. No one wants to take *me* on."

"I'm sure they have their reasons. I've already explained mine."

"Are the rains the only reason you won't take me into the Superstitions?" Sierra asked.

Adam's eyes narrowed as he studied her. Sierra could tell he wasn't used to being challenged.

"People interested in the Lost Dutchman Mine usually get into trouble," Adam replied. "No one's found that gold for over a century, but every year crazy treasure hunters show up to try their luck."

Sierra's eyes flashed. "Is that what you've heard from your grapevine? That I'm a crazy treasure hunter? I'll tell you the same thing I told them. I'm working on a book, and my publisher wants the completed version by the end of the month. That includes photographs."

"That's what you *claim*. The question is, are you really working on a book, or is that just the story you're using to get a guide? Even if you are

a bona-fide researcher..." Adam said skeptically.

"I *am*! I can prove it. I—"

"I'm not interested."

Sierra wasn't giving up. She needed a guide. Adam Copeland was the last name on her list, and he refused to help.

"Well, it appears I'll just have to go into the mountains alone, Mr. Copeland. Can you at least tell me where I can find some good detail maps?"

"You can't go out there by yourself!" For the first time, Adam's calm was shaken.

"I can, and I will. This project means a lot to Tony and me."

Especially me, she added silently. But those reasons were personal.

"I was raised in Colorado herding cattle on my parents' ranch. I'm used to navigating large distances alone. I'll do just fine. Now, if you'll tell me where I can buy maps and maybe rent a horse, I'll be on my way."

Sierra felt Adam sizing her up, but she refused to be intimidated.

Adam finally spoke. "If you were as smart as you say about the outdoors, you'd realize that Arizona isn't Colorado."

"There are such things as can-tees," she said sarcastically. "And as I can't find a guide, it appears I have no other choice. You were the last name on my list."

Adam sighed heavily. "It's idiotic to go into the Superstitions on your own. Can't you come back when the monsoon season is over?"

"I can't afford to wait that long! My publisher says to get the photos

and final draft in by July first, so here I am. If I don't, I'll have to return my advance, which, by the way, I've already spent. What's more, I have a reputation to protect."

"Your reputation isn't going to do you any good if you're dead," he said wryly.

"I appreciate your advice, but I'm going anyway," she retorted.

Adam peered at her closely. "I'm not going to change my mind. I won't guide during the monsoon season. I hope for your sake you're bluffing, Miss Vaughn. I'd hate having to come after you if you're stupid enough to try this alone. I'd hate even more seeing you injured—or worse."

"I asked for your guide service, Mr. Copeland, not a rescue service. I don't plan on needing it. What's more, I don't appreciate being insulted. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like a bath, my dinner and a soft bed. Good night."

Adam brushed an invisible speck of dust off his shirt. "You'd better leave me your travel plans. Someone should know where you are in case you get lost or hurt. It might as well be me."

Sierra had to acknowledge the logic and, yes, the wisdom of his words. Back at the ranch, she remembered, you never traveled alone without telling someone where you were going.

"I want to see the southern side of the Superstitions. I intend to take the Peralta Trail first to Weavers Needle, and then on to Black Top Mountain."

Adam's concern vanished. "Black Top Mountain isn't where the mine's supposed to be located."

"I know that."

"Then why are you headed there? What's this all about?"

Sierra sighed with exasperation. "I intend to take some photos for my own personal interest," she explained. "I'll try to make a magazine sale on my own with them. My publisher isn't interested in Black Top Mountain because that area has nothing to do with the mine's alleged location, but it's good historical material."

Adam didn't respond. She had gold fever, just as he'd accused.

Sierra once again turned toward her car, but Adam quickly intercepted her. "Perhaps I've reconsidered."

Sierra paused, and studied him in the failing light.

"Perhaps?" She couldn't help but get her hopes up.

"You haven't convinced me you're on the level, but I certainly don't like the idea of you out there alone. Tell me you're not chasing treasure, and I'll hire on as your guide."

Sierra was thrown into confusion. She needed him, yet how could she admit that she was chasing treasure?

Sierra hesitated. She wanted to tell him the truth. She really did. But she couldn't risk it. There was too much at stake.

"I'm just completing an assignment."

"For your sake, I hope so." Adam's voice cut the desert air like a blast of arctic wind. "I'll meet you at your hotel tomorrow morning. But if you've lied to me, if you do have gold fever, you're on your own."

LATER, in the warmth of the hotel bath, Sierra's uneasiness returned.

What would Adam Copeland say if he found out he had, indeed, been hired by a treasure hunter? She worked the washcloth over her legs. Years on her parents' cattle ranch had produced the wiry strength that her curves couldn't quite disguise. You didn't grow up roping cattle without becoming strong. Even now, seven years after leaving home and that dreadful way of life, her lean body still bore its marks.

And so did her heart.

Sierra stepped out of the tub and dried herself, still deep in thought. She slipped into a nightgown and slid under the sheets. As far as her career was concerned, leaving the ranch and getting a degree in history had paid off. She managed to earn a modest living and was free from a way of life she hated. Unfortunately she'd stumbled into an even more painful situation.

It had begun innocently enough, when she met Tony Miller in college. Sierra had been impressed by his interest in the history of the Southwest. At first they studied together, dating casually. After graduation, they started working together. Their relationship became more serious. When Tony proposed last year, she'd considered herself the luckiest woman alive.

Until a routine pre-wedding medical exam changed all her plans.

"I'm...I'm what?" she'd said to the doctor in a stricken voice.

"The medical term is sterile, Miss Vaughn."

"Sterile? But Tony and I want children! Lots of children!"

With a heavy heart, she'd told Tony the truth. The look on his face had

frightened her. Sierra knew, long before the words were actually spoken, that the wedding was off.

Tony wanted his "own children," not someone else's "abandoned babies."

That was a year ago. Sierra had survived Tony's betrayal. But she couldn't get used to the idea of never becoming a mother. Finally she decided that, husband or not, she was going to adopt.

The decision did much to ease the pain in her heart. But there was yet another problem. Sierra couldn't adopt unless she had a steady job. The adoption agencies frowned on free-lance research work with its uneven income. That was why she and Tony were still working together. They had pitched their book idea before the breakup.

Sierra was tired of free-lancing, tired of the struggle to find steady work. But she had plans to change all that. She'd heard there was a permanent staff job coming up at *Southwest History*, a top-notch magazine she'd frequently contributed to as a free-lancer.

Since Sierra's specialty was the history of the Southwest, she'd made regular requests regarding a permanent position. A few months ago her persistence had paid off. The owner of the magazine was interested in the Lost Dutchman, and he'd heard of her book project. Depending on the quality of that book, he might be prepared to offer her a job.

Sierra badly wanted that job, and she knew a way to make the book a rousing best-seller. She had to uncover more than just the Lost Dutch-

man's history. She had to find the Lost Dutchman itself, together with its legendary gold. The wealth meant nothing to her. In any event, the Superstitions were now a National Forest, and any gold found in them belonged to the government.

But *finding* the gold... If she could find it, actually find it, she'd be famous.

The staff writer's job meant she'd be permitted to adopt children. Her children would be free to reap the benefits of her love, something no one ever had time for on the ranch.

Sierra was smart, and she'd done her homework. The treasure of the Lost Dutchman Mine, and everything that came with it, would be hers.

She was sure of it.

*

SIERRA TOOK one last look around her hotel room. It was early morning, but she'd been up for hours. She'd already dressed and eaten, intending to study her notes until Adam arrived.

A knock on the door surprised her. It was nowhere near eight.

"You're early," Sierra commented as she let Adam Copeland in.

"And you're ready, I see," he said. "I didn't think you would be."

"Habit. Late risers always missed breakfast on the ranch."

"Did you turn in your rental car?" he asked.

"I took care of that last night. And we can take the side door from my room. It goes out to the parking lot."

"Aren't you going to check out?" he asked curiously.

"I need a place where I can keep the rest of my stuff. Also a number where I can be reached by Tony or my publisher." And the adoption agency, she added silently.

Adam led her to a late-model truck and opened the passenger door. But Sierra didn't climb in right away. She was getting her first really good look at his face in the uncompromising light of day. She took in the angular lines of the jaw and high cheekbones, the full yet totally male shape of the lips, and the proud carriage of the head that suggested warrior blood, both Spanish and Indian.

"Do I pass muster?" he asked.

Sierra was embarrassed that he'd caught her staring, but she managed not to blush. "I didn't get a good look at you last night."

"Neither did I," Adam replied, and now she was the one under examination.

Finances were discussed and quickly settled. Adam took her pack and loaded it into the back of his pickup with the rest of the gear. Then he climbed in and drove off.

"Where are we headed first?" Sierra asked.

"We have to go into Apache Junction to see Weldon, a friend of mine. I board my horse at his place, and you'll need to rent one from him."

ALONG THE WAY, Sierra took out her notebook and pen from her backpack. "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about the Lost Dutchman Mine?"

Adam's smile instantly vanished.

"I'd rather ask you the questions," he replied. "I like to know a bit about my clients before any expeditions. Are you married?"

"What kind of question is that?"

Sierra challenged.

Adam grimaced. "Believe it or not, I once had a husband accuse me of trying to steal his wife."

"I see." Sierra was piqued to find that his question was purely job-related. "Well, I'm single. You?"

Adam looked sideways at her, one eyebrow lifted, before turning his attention back to the road.

"Fair's fair," Sierra insisted. "I don't want a jealous wife accusing me of trying to sneak into your tent. So, are you?"

"I have no wife, no girlfriend. The life of a desert guide doesn't seem very attractive to women. Since you don't have a husband, is there a boyfriend I should worry about?"

Sierra thought of her sterility, and how Tony had reacted to it. "Right now, the idea of a steady man in my life holds little appeal."

"I see. Then I can assume you don't have any children?"

"No, not yet. But I will someday. I plan to adopt one soon, I hope." Sierra's voice grew soft. "I passed my final interview with an adoption agency in Denver last month. I could become a mother any time now."

"Adoption? You?" Adam's voice was abrupt, even harsh.

"Why not? There's nothing wrong with being a single parent."

"Children should have the benefit of a mother *and* a father," Adam said.

Sierra crossed her arms over her

chest. "I agree, in principle. But I refuse to marry just so the children I want will have a father. I won't settle for just any man. I want someone I'm deeply in love with, who's willing to accept me as I am, flaws and all. And I don't see what this discussion has to do with your being my guide."

"It has nothing to do with my being your guide. It has everything to do with the fact that I was raised in an orphanage."

Sierra's jaw dropped. "You were raised in an orphanage?"

"Yes. My mother was poor, unmarried and pregnant. She left me at the orphanage, then later died of malnutrition-related causes. I never knew who my father was."

"You were never adopted?" she asked curiously.

"I had a trial adoption once, by a single woman. Like you. It only lasted six months. Even though I was on my best behavior, she returned me to the orphanage. The worst part was that I had grown to love her during that time. So you can understand why I'm a firm believer in two-parent adoptions. It increases the odds for success."

"I see. And I'm very sorry." She ached with sympathy for him, but wasn't about to explain why there probably wouldn't be a husband in her life.

"Well, you haven't been offered a child yet," Adam said, with unmistakable relief.

"Sometimes those waiting lists take forever," she replied. "So tell me, what did you study?"

Adam graciously accepted her ob-

vious desire to change the subject. "Music. In college, it seemed a logical choice. I was always interested in it, and from the age of about twelve, I was the organist for our church."

"How did you end up as a guide?" Sierra asked.

"By default, I suppose."

"But to go from being a university-trained musician to being a guide... Don't you miss your music?"

"I don't miss it, because I never gave it up," Adam said with a smile, apparently not annoyed by Sierra's numerous questions. "Right now my specialty is the reed flute."

"But don't you wonder how your life would have turned out if you'd stuck with your career?" Sierra asked. "I sometimes wonder how my life would have turned out if I hadn't been raised on a ranch."

Adam shrugged lightly. "I don't think in those terms. I have fond memories of the people who raised me and the children I grew up with."

"It sounds like you had a happy childhood."

The happiness in Adam's eyes faded. "As long as I remained in the orphanage, I did. It was the time I wasn't there that was hell."

"It must have been rough on you."

Adam's face became closed and tight. "Save your sympathy. As an adult, I don't need it."

"ARE WE almost at the ranch?" Sierra asked much later.

"Yes. And it's not much of a ranch." Adam's manner was polite, although a bit stiff. "Weldon only

keeps half a dozen horses besides mine. He knows we're coming, but he may not be around.

Sierra nodded. After a few minutes, Adam turned off the highway and then onto a dirt road.

"Here, we are." Adam parked the truck near a weathered wood corral in front of an even more weathered barn. There was a small house, too.

Sierra opened the door of the truck and slid out. The hot air hit her like a blast furnace.

Adam checked the water level of the trough and frowned, then turned on the tap. The horses shifted a little at the smell of fresh water, and one bold brown-and-white paint shoved his nose under the pouring stream.

"I don't think Weldon's here. Let's go in the house."

He patted a roan Appaloosa stallion that Sierra guessed must be his own horse. Adam waited until the trough filled, then shut off the spigot. To Sierra's surprise, he took her arm and tucked it inside his.

The door opened into a kitchen on the right and a tiny parlor on the left. Adam found a note on the battered kitchen table and read it aloud. "'Be back late tonight. Would you water the horses?'"

"It's just the two of us, then. In that case..." Adam tossed down the note and walked purposefully toward the air conditioner. "This goes off."

"What did you do that for?" Sierra asked in dismay.

"If you can get through today without passing out, you might just survive in the mountains. Consider this a test period."

"What other little tests do you have in store for me?" she asked.

"Well, now that you mention it... Before it gets any hotter, I thought I'd see for myself just how well you ride."

Sierra frowned. "Why ride in this heat?"

"Since I'm going to be risking my own skin guiding you during monsoon season, I think I'm justified in asking you to verify your riding abilities."

WHEN SHE HEADED for the corral, Sierra saw that Adam was already waiting. The brown-and-white paint, the horse Sierra had noticed earlier at the pump, had been saddled for her and tied to the fence.

Adam untied the paint and led him over to her, holding the reins as she mounted.

Sierra gently pressed her heels to the horse's sides and clicked her tongue. Nothing, not even the slightest movement, occurred beneath her.

"Stubborn little gelding, isn't he?" Adam remarked.

"Not for long," Sierra replied, annoyed that she'd been stuck with such a sorry mount. But she'd ridden balky mules like this back at the ranch, and she knew the cure.

After putting the horse through a few moves she'd learned on the ranch, she gently clicked her tongue. The paint moved forward in a straight line before she even had to touch her boots to his flanks.

"That's much better," she praised. The horse flicked his ears attentively

in her direction. He was ready to please now.

"Got any hoops for me to jump through, or am I all finished?" Sierra asked when she returned to Adam.

"Just one more thing."

Sierra sighed loudly. "Now what?"

"Take this." Adam picked up the coiled lariat hanging on a post of the corral and tossed it to her. "I want to see you use it."

"Whatever for? There aren't going to be any cattle in the Superstitions."

"You said you were from a cattle ranch. You shouldn't mind giving me a little proof."

Sierra bit her lip in anger. "If you want proof, I'll give you proof." She examined the lariat. "You'll find some leather gloves inside my backpack. Would you please get them for me?"

Adam left, then came back with her gloves a couple of minutes later.

When Sierra had pulled them on, she shook out a loop before carefully coiling the lariat and positioning it in one hand.

"What do you want me to rope? Another horse? A fence post?"

"Just head down to the mailbox, then come back at a canter," he ordered. "When you reach me, you'll see your target."

Sierra reached the mailbox, then kicked the paint into a canter as they headed back to the corral. She'd roped thousands of ornery cattle in her life.

The paint kept up a steady pace as he approached the corral. Suddenly Adam yanked off his broad-brimmed leather hat and threw it. The horse veered slightly in surprise, but Sierra's

loop was already hissing through the air. It settled around the hat, then tightened with a flick of her wrist. Sierra slowed her horse and retrieved her line. At the end of the lariat was Adam's hat, the crown crushed in the middle where the loop held it fast.

Sierra rode toward Adam, then reined in the paint. She loosened the lariat, pulled out the hat and proudly tossed it to him.

Adam gave a low whistle. "Well, Miss Vaughn, it appears you're everything you say you are. We'll head out for the Superstitions first thing tomorrow morning."

*

WELDON HAD returned home in a beat-up old truck. This morning, immediately after dawn, he'd driven them to the head of the Peralta Trail, the main entrance into the Superstitions. He'd helped them unload and saddle the horses, and secure their saddlebags and supplies.

Sierra and Adam were now at the trailhead to sign in, a Forest Service requirement for anyone entering the Superstition National Wilderness Area.

"Where will you be exiting?" asked the forest ranger.

"Weldon plans to meet us at the First Water Trailhead with the horse trailer a week from today."

Just then, the paint snorted, pawing the ground, and Sierra tightened her grip on the reins. Adam's horse, a strawberry-roan Appaloosa, was giving her no problem. The stallion's tail swished contentedly across white

flanks dotted with red, dollar-sized circles.

"Monsoon season isn't the best time of year to be in this area," the ranger cautioned. "If the heat doesn't get you, the storms will."

"I know," Adam agreed. "We'll be careful."

"Have a safe trip," were the ranger's parting words.

"We will," Adam replied. "All right, Miss Vaughn, mount up."

The paint was cooperative, standing still as she climbed into the saddle. She reached into her jeans pocket, pulled on her leather riding gloves, then adjusted the lariat she'd borrowed from Weldon on her pommel.

"Ready for the roundup?" Adam noticed her adjusting the rope. He swung himself easily into the saddle, the Appaloosa shifting from foot to foot in his eagerness to go.

Sierra pulled back her hand self-consciously and shrugged. "I'm so used to carrying one, I'd feel uncomfortable without it. I suppose old habits die hard, Mr. Copeland."

"As long as we're on the trail, why don't we drop the formality and use first names? You can call me Adam."

"If you'll call me Sierra," she agreed. Sierra shaded her eyes and stood in her stirrups. "How far are we from Weavers Needle?" she asked.

"We're not at a good angle, but I'll point it out when we get closer. It's only a day's ride away, but depending on the heat, we may need to take two. I'm assuming you want to poke around that area?"

"Yes. Weavers Needle traditionally

marked the Dutchman's location, so that's where I want to concentrate."

According to her research, the traditional site wasn't where the mine was located. She suspected the Dutchman was somewhere else, near Black Top Mountain, the next landmark they'd reach after Weavers Needle.

Adam patted the stallion's neck with an affection that Sierra found herself envying. "You're looking at Lightning Bolt."

"He's a beautiful animal. He must have cost a small fortune."

"If he did, he was worth it. Besides, I have little else to spend my money on."

"Don't you have a home?" Sierra questioned.

It seemed to Sierra that Adam took a long time to study the trail ahead of them before he answered. "By home, do you mean a place with a white picket fence and flowers out front?"

"Something along those lines."

"I don't have a house. I do own about twenty acres of land out here in the desert. I'd planned on building, but..." He shrugged. "I wanted a home for my family. Since I don't have a family, I don't need a house."

"Maybe someday you'll find a woman you want to marry. Then you'll build your house in record time," Sierra said.

Adam gave a wry smile. "Perhaps."

After they'd ridden on for a time, Sierra removed her camera from one of the saddlebags and took some photographs. The temperature escalated as the sun rose higher and higher. It was a relief when Adam, still riding ahead,

pulled off the trail and made for a rocky outcropping.

She followed him into the shade, pushing her hat onto her back and wiping her forehead. Adam dismounted, so Sierra did the same.

After they had rested, they rode abreast again, the sun hot on their backs. From time to time Adam pointed out particular species of cactus or birds for her, willingly stopping so Sierra could photograph them.

"You really do know your way around the outdoors," Adam said approvingly. "My usual customers are hot, cranky, saddle-sore and feeling hopelessly lost by now."

"Compared to ranch life, this is a walk in the park," Sierra said, meaning every word.

"You didn't like cattle ranching, did you?"

Sierra gave him a rueful smile. "It shows, huh?"

"I used to pray every night that I'd get a family of my very own," Adam said unexpectedly. "I don't think you should be so harsh on your life."

"Don't misunderstand me," Sierra said quickly. "It's just that there was so much work to be done there wasn't time for..." Companionship? Affection? Love? "...anything else. I'm free of all that now."

"You've got it wrong," Adam said quietly. "The people who lived at the orphanage and my friends in the desert were always there for me. They still are. Family and friends—they're what you count on. Not the rest of the world."

The loyalty in his voice when he

spoke of his friends affected Sierra more than she cared to admit.

"Maybe we should just agree to disagree, and drop this," Sierra said, but Adam wouldn't take her suggestion.

"I can't believe you plan to adopt. You're going to deprive that child of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and worst of all, a father. If you're lonely, it's your own choosing. It sounds as if you've decided to become a mother simply to fill a hole in your life—a hole that *you've* created."

Sierra's jaw dropped in shock and she felt herself go rigid with anger. It was a moment before she could speak.

"How dare you? I'll make an excellent mother! I know everything a mother should do. My child will have everything I never did. He or she will want for nothing. As soon as I finish the work for this book, I'll have a steady income. My reputation will be made and I'll get that staff job! All I have to do is find the Lost Dutchman and—"

Sierra stopped abruptly when she saw Adam's face. With horror, she realized her mistake.

"So—" his eyes blazed—"you did lie. You're a treasure hunter, after all."

SIERRA FROZE in her saddle, her hands motionless on the reins. Despite her best intentions, she'd revealed what she'd intended to hide.

Adam leaned over in his saddle, grabbed her reins and stopped her horse. "Get down," he ordered in a voice that stung like whiplash.

"I won't." He was so angry she feared he might leave her in the middle of the desert. "You have no right to judge my private affairs."

"You lied to me, lady. You smiled that pretty little smile and lied through your teeth." Adam was furious, and he held the paint's reins with a clenched fist.

"If I'd told you the truth, would you have listened to my reasons for finding the mine?" Sierra demanded. "Would you have taken me into the Superstitions?"

Adam swore a distinctly negative answer.

"That's what I thought. And that's why I kept quiet."

Adam glared at her, his eyes accusing. "People who live in fantasyland end up in psychiatric wards. I refuse to be a part of your delusions."

"This isn't a delusion!" Sierra shouted. Then she sighed. "Look, I don't care about finding the mine for supposed treasure. I want to find the mine so I can lay claim to a historical find! If I do, I'm virtually guaranteed a staff position with *Southwest History*. My reputation would be secure and I'd definitely get that staff job!"

"The business about your reputation I can understand, but a job at *Southwest History*? What in the world does that have to do with anything?" Adam asked, incredulous.

"The adoption agency won't let me adopt as long as I'm free-lance."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing!" Adam bristled. "You're basing your whole future as a prospective parent on finding a legend? Good Lord, Si-

erra, you're dreaming the impossible!"

"At least I dare to dream! That seems to be a lot more than you do!" Sierra countered.

"Lady, you dream all you want," he said in a harsh voice. "But count me out." He whirled his horse around and slapped the reins against the Appaloosa's flanks. Sierra saw horse and rider retreat down the trail, leaving her alone with the desert.

SIERRA CONSIDERED her options. She couldn't go any farther, not without a map. Adam had those. Although she could probably find her way out of the mountains, there was no one waiting for her with a truck and a horse trailer.

Sierra felt confident that he'd come back for her when he'd cooled off. He'd been too concerned for her safety all the time just to abandon her.

She decided her wisest course of action was to find a place in the shade to sit. It was past noon. She wasn't hungry, but she could relax, update her notes and let the horse graze.

She closed her eyes against the sun and thought about Adam Copeland and his self-imposed solitude.

She must have dozed off, because a shadow crossed her face, waking her. At first she thought she was at the ranch.

"Is it my turn to check the stock, Dad?" she asked in a voice thick with sleep.

"It's Adam, Sierra, not your father."

"Adam?" Sierra rubbed her eyes. "Oh. I thought I was back home."

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. "It was just the heat. It made me drowsy. What about you? I was worried."

An unidentified expression flickered in his eyes. "It's been a long time since anyone worried about me." He continued to stand above her.

"I did worry, Adam."

"Well, it's time to start worrying about yourself. The whole canyon behind us is filled with dust devils."

"Oh, is *that* all?"

"Get on your horse, Sierra. Arizona dust devils can end up as full-blown sandstorms with eighty-mile-an-hour winds. Come on. It may be nothing but I want us to find shelter just in case."

Spurred on by the urgency in Adam's voice, Sierra immediately did as he said.

Soon Adam dismounted and led Lightning Bolt to a narrow ledge. The ground was littered with rocks, and both horses and humans had to pick their way carefully.

"Now what?" Sierra asked when they stood beneath the ledge.

"Now we wait," Adam frowned as he looked up the canyon. "Make sure you hold on tightly to Spot's reins. The horses' instinct will be to outrun the storm, but they'll break a leg in this part of the canyon."

Sierra nodded. She looped the reins tightly around one hand, then pulled her bandanna over her mouth and nose.

"Here they come," Adam said.

A whirling spout of dirt and wind came rushing down the canyon. It was only a few feet high, and Sierra

breathed a sigh of relief—until she saw the one that followed. This one was perhaps six feet high and much more violent than the first.

The two dust devils danced a random pattern backward, forward and sideways. Suddenly one of them slammed into the other, and the two grew into one large spout.

One of the horses screamed as howling pieces of sand were driven into its delicate velvet muzzle. Sierra held tightly to the reins, closed her eyes and pulled her hat brim low on her face. It didn't help. She felt as though she was being scoured alive by sand.

Then she felt Adam's hand on her back, shoving her hard against the belly of the horse. She started to back away, not wanting her toes near the iron-shod hooves, but Adam put his hand to her neck and pushed her face against the horse's side, sheltering it from the howling screaming sand.

She felt tears in her eyes, tears that weren't caused by the stinging sand. For what seemed like the first time in her life, she hadn't been left alone to take care of herself.

Then, with a suddenness that surprised her, the giant dust devil was gone.

"Are you all right?" they both asked at the same time.

That broke the spell. They smiled awkwardly at each other.

Sierra bit her lip. Just thinking about Adam in such a ferocious storm was very unsettling.

"Thank you for looking after me," she said. "And I want to apologize. I shouldn't have lied to you about want-

ing to search for the Dutchman. Will you still guide me?"

The reference to the mine brought a frown to Adam's face. He released her. "I'll still guide you," he said, but seeing Sierra's joy, added, "against my better judgment."

"Thank you."

"In fact, not only will I guide you, but I intend to help you look for the mine."

Sierra couldn't believe her good fortune, and her eyes opened wide with surprise. "You will?"

"Yes."

"How can I thank you properly?" Sierra asked. "Would you like more money? You know I couldn't offer you gold," she reminded him. "If I find any, the government owns it."

Adam shook his head. "I don't want anyone's money. In fact, I want to do this for nothing."

"Then what *do* you want?" she asked in confusion.

"Nothing."

"This sounds too good to be true. There *has* to be a catch," she said suspiciously.

"I wouldn't call it a catch. A condition, perhaps."

"I thought so." Sierra took in a deep breath, then exhaled. "All right, let's hear it."

"If I can accommodate you against my better judgment, then you can do the same for me. I want you to consider giving up your plans to adopt a child."

"That's insane! I can't believe you'd say that!"

Adam crossed his arms over his

chest. "I think it's insane to deny a child the benefits of two parents."

"It's none of your business! Look, I'm sorry you were raised in an orphanage, and I'm sorry you were never adopted. But I can't allow you to influence me. I want to have a child."

"I don't understand your big rush to adopt," Adam told her. "You're young, Sierra. And you're an intelligent, attractive woman. There's no reason you shouldn't marry someday and have your own children." Adam studied her carefully. "Or is there?"

Sierra immediately shied away from the question. "For someone who likes to keep to himself, you're awfully interested in my personal life. I'd like to know why."

"Obviously this is a sensitive subject with you," Adam said quietly.

Yes, it *was* sensitive. Painfully so. She was a sterile woman whose fiancé hadn't wanted her because of it.

"You still haven't answered my question," she retorted. "Why are you so concerned?"

Much to her surprise and relief, Adam dropped his questions and answered hers instead. "Because this is important to me, too. For personal reasons. I told you about my failed adoption attempt."

"Go on."

"What I didn't tell you was that she was a writer."

"A writer?" Sierra repeated, surprised.

"Yes, like you. Sit down, Sierra."

The two of them shared space on one of the bigger rocks.

"Her name was Melanie and she

wrote poetry," he said softly. "She'd just sold her first book. Her finances seemed sound. But there was a dry spell between the first book and the second, which is why I ended up back in the orphanage."

Sierra was aghast. "Adam, I'm so sorry. I'm sure she only did what she thought best. I'm sure she was trying to put your welfare first."

"I know she was. She even tried to readopt me when she had money again."

"Melanie came back for you?"

Adam nodded. "I kept refusing to see her, and finally she stopped coming to the orphanage altogether. It wasn't until I left the university that I finally tried to contact her."

"Did you find her?"

"I found her headstone."

Sierra touched his shoulder.

Adam shook off her hand by rising to his feet.

"I'm only telling you this so you can see what a big mistake you're making. And that's why I'll still guide you. All I ask is that you allow me to try and change your mind about single-parent adoption."

Sierra bit her lower lip and considered. "I don't have to make any ridiculous promises? Don't forget I'm already on the waiting list for a child."

"No. All I want is you to listen to me with an open mind."

AFTER a quick lunch, which neither of them wanted, they mounted up again. Once they were back on the trail, Adam proved true to his word.

"What would you like to know about the Lost Dutchman?" he asked.

Sierra shrugged. "I don't have any questions now. I'd rather just ride and look at the scenery right now."

That was the truth. For the first time since she'd met Adam, she felt uncomfortable in his presence.

*

THE SUN hadn't set, but it had fallen beneath the peaks and spires of the Superstitions. Orange light filtered through, giving the mountains a burnished metallic glow.

"You've been awfully quiet since we set up camp," Adam observed. "Was the heat too much for you?"

"Not at all." Sierra checked on her tent stakes one more time, worried that they might loosen in the sandy ground.

Tomorrow they'd reach Weavers Needle. If she wanted a good night's sleep, she'd better get her thoughts on the Dutchman and away from Adam Copeland. Unfortunately that was proving rather difficult....

"You could keep me company," Adam said quietly, as if reading her mind.

That brought Sierra to a halt. Adam actually sounded lonely.

"That would be nice." She leaned against a large rock, and Adam soon joined her. They sat next to one another, relaxed and silent, savoring the coolness of the night air.

Sierra turned toward Adam and tried to make out his face in the dark.

"About that... Thank you for taking care of me during the sandstorm. I

mean dust devil. It was a lot less nerve-racking with you there."

"You're welcome. But thanks aren't needed. I do the same for all my customers."

"Do you?" Sierra asked quietly. "Do you cover their necks with your own hand?"

Adam traced a path down her cheek with one finger. "Not all my customers have such soft skin."

"I still want to say thanks," Sierra lifted her hand to his shoulder. His body felt warm and welcoming under her palm.

"I know you're from snow country. Why do you seem so at home in the desert?" He pulled her closer with an arm around her waist, his lips a mere fraction from hers. "Why do you seem so at home in my arms?"

Sierra's soft response, "Because I think I am," was never heard. Adam's lips covered hers in a gentle kiss, a kiss that felt honest and right, that left her straining for more. It came as a shock when Adam broke the embrace.

"Perhaps you'd better get to bed," he said. "It's late, and I shouldn't keep you up any longer."

SIERRA HAD undressed and was crawling into her sleeping bag when the clear notes of the flute began. The unfamiliar melody was haunting and beautiful, swelling with a life of its own in the night air. Sierra suspected the song was Adam's own composition. Suddenly she heard two reed flutes. The new flute played what she recognized as traditional music, while

Adam's flute skillfully wove new notes among the old.

If she wasn't afraid of breaking the spell, Sierra would have dressed and left the tent to see who had joined Adam. As it was, she could have listened all night to the music. She was sitting up in her bag, wide-eyed when one of the flutes gradually became softer and softer, then was silent.

Sierra smiled to herself and nestled into the sleeping bag. But it was long before morning when Sierra saw Adam again. A violent noise woke her and she opened her eyes to see flashing lights outside. She recognized the noise as thunder and quickly dressed, then shook out her boots and pulled them on. As she hurried out of her tent, she saw that Adam, also dressed, was watching the sky.

Adam reached for her hand and pulled her next to him. "Welcome to monsoon season."

Sierra pushed her tousled hair away from her face. The air was heavy with the smell of far-off rain. "I've never seen anything like this. The night clouds are actually bright," she said with wonder. "And that storm must be miles away."

Even from this distance, Sierra was awed by the power locked within those light-streaked purple clouds. "I always thought the desert was so peaceful."

"There's a dark side to everything, Sierra. Don't you know that?"

THE NEXT MORNING a short ride took them to the base of Weavers Needle. As they hiked to its peak, Sierra found

herself humming bits of the song he had played the night before. She had to practically force herself to take notes, snap three rolls of film and familiarize herself with the area.

By lunchtime her efforts paid off. She had most of what she needed for the book.

Her next step was to do some treasure hunting. She needed to consult Adam's map; her own maps were all old.

Adam ate some beef jerky. "My map doesn't have any X-marks-the-spot on it any more than your old ones do."

"Very funny." Sierra washed down a sandwich with a swig from her canteen. "I want to see how much the trails have changed over the years."

"Does this mean you're ready to start treasure hunting now?"

Sierra saw no point in sidestepping the issue. "Yes."

Adam continued eating. "You'll be disappointed if you intend to pinpoint the supposed location by comparing the old maps with the new ones. The landscape doesn't remain the same from one year to the next."

"I know that. I've made allowances."

"Did you make allowances for the earthquake?"

Sierra felt a moment's panic. "What earthquake?"

"In the late 1800s an earthquake hit south-central Arizona. The Superstitions were right in the middle of that earthquake zone."

Her confidence shaken, Sierra felt her heart grow cold. How could she have made such a terrible omission?

"This can't be a well-documented fact!"

"It's not commonly known," Adam agreed. "It didn't cause any fatalities, which I guess is why it disappeared from the record books. Will this alter your plans?"

Sierra hated hearing the pity in his voice. "I'll just have to...to work around it."

"What happens if you don't find the Lost Dutchman?" he pressed.

"I don't know!"

Adam rose to his feet. "You'd better know before an agency places a child in your arms. And you'd better not base your hopes of adoption on finding a mythical gold mine."

Sierra also got up. "And if I do?" she challenged.

"If you do, you might end up giving that child right back again. And that's something I'd never forgive."

THE REST of the afternoon left little time for thinking. Adam chose a site for their base camp, just north of Weavers Needle and south of Black Top Mountain.

Sierra busied herself first with comparing maps, then scouting for promising landmarks. She pushed aside all thoughts of the earthquake. How much of a difference could one little earthquake mean?

Adam remained at her side. His disapproving attitude gradually relaxed and he answered all her questions. He even assisted in her search for landmarks. She decided to hike as far as she could up Black Top Mountain—

not an easy task, considering the broken spires and loose rock.

It was late in the day when she finally stopped her ascent, Adam beside her. She took some more pictures and studied the maps. Suddenly a hand reached under her nose to pull the map away. Sierra glanced up in surprise.

"You're missing the view. Try looking at it with an eye toward beauty, not treasure."

She drew in a deep breath, reveling in the sight: "What's that large formation to the south?" Sierra asked. "Isn't it west of where we picked up the trail?"

"Yes. That whole rock formation is Superstition Mountain, which gives its name to this range. You didn't get a good look at it because we drove right up to the base."

"What would I have seen?"

"There's a chalk cliff shaped like a great wave ready to break. It's part of a limestone ledge."

Adam pointed to the distant south. "You can't see it from this angle, but the other cliffs on the front of the mountain have rock formations shaped like humans."

"I'd like to get some pictures of the formations for our book," Sierra said.

"Good idea. That area's a beautiful part of the mountains." Adam's voice warmed with enthusiasm. "Most people miss it because it's on the outside of the entrance to the Superstitions. We could backtrack now if you want."

"I'd like that, Adam, but I don't think I can afford the time away from my..."

"Treasure hunt?"

Sierra flushed. "My work. You understand, don't you?"

"I understand all too clearly." The animation left his face. "It's getting late. I don't want us descending in the dark," he said.

Sierra took one last look around, then followed him. Their descent was made in silence.

"What would you like to eat?" Adam asked.

"What I'd really like is for you to stop talking to me in that disapproving voice."

"You know how I feel about treasure hunters."

"I know. We rank only above single women who want to adopt. Not that I have a chance of success in either, according to you." Sierra stowed her camera and notebook away with jerky motions. "It's becoming tiresome."

"I've treated you with every courtesy and I'm..." Adam took a step toward her, but Sierra averted her face. "Sierra, are you crying?"

"Of course not." She dashed away her tears with a furious hand. "I'm angry. There's a difference." She checked to make sure she had had fresh film for the morning. "Go eat."

"I don't want to eat. I want to talk to you! Isn't that what we agreed? I've fulfilled my part of the bargain by helping you search for the mine, haven't I?"

"In addition to doing everything you can to discourage me," she accused him.

Adam's eyes narrowed. "Every word I've said has been the truth, which is more than you can say."

Sierra gasped indignantly. "You've called me a liar once too often," Adam Copeland. All right, so I told one lie. I admit it. I've said I'm sorry. But I want children. What's wrong with that? Who are you to judge me?"

"I'm no judge." Adam reached for her arms and pulled her close. "But I am your guide, and I'm not going to let you get hurt in these mountains."

"Now that's a switch!" Sierra couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Since when did you stop treating me like a customer and actually realize I'm a person?"

"Since now," he said, and he brought his mouth down hard on hers.

*

ADAM'S LIPS demanded a response—a response that Sierra chose to make. Suddenly she was aware of everything: the warmth of the setting sun on her back, the smell of the creosote bushes, and the feel of Adam's body against her.

Even when he released her, that awareness remained. Sierra wondered if her world would ever again be the same. She brought her fingertips up to her lips and traced where his had been.

"I'm not going to apologize for that," Adam said hoarsely.

"I'm not asking you to," she replied quietly. This was a kiss of passion, of fierce possession.

Sierra kept her gaze on Adam. She desperately wanted to know what he was thinking, what he was feeling.

Adam said nothing, but Sierra could

feel his eyes follow her all the way into her tent.

She carefully studied her maps. Sierra was certain she'd worked out the precise location of the mine, despite what Adam had told her about the earthquake. Her observations today from Black Top Mountain had only confirmed her feelings. She was so close.

Somehow, the prospect of leaving Adam—going home—didn't make for a good night's rest. She was still awake hours later when she heard him at her tent flap.

"Sierra? Are you decent?"

"Just a minute." Sierra groped for the flashlight beside her and turned it on. Then she climbed out of the sleeping bag and pulled on her shirt and jeans. "All right, come on in."

Adam unzipped the flap, letting in a rush of cold air. He grabbed her boots, shook them out and handed them to her. "Here. Get these on, and hurry."

Sierra looked up in alarm. "What's wrong?" she asked as she reached for her socks.

"There's a big thunderstorm headed this way. We've got to get out of here—fast."

"Where are we headed?" Sierra asked as she began to roll up her sleeping bag.

Adam started rolling the ground cloth. "As far out of here as we can get. I—"

His words were drowned out by a booming clap of thunder.

"Forget the sleeping bag. Grab your bags and saddle. I've got to get to the horses."

"What about the tent?" Sierra asked in confusion.

"Leave it! We're getting the hell out of here!"

SIERRA WAS gasping. She didn't know how long they'd been riding, but she was breathless with the effort of holding on. Was it minutes? Hours? She was exhausted from the pounding pace of the gallop. And, in the dark she wasn't sure where she was.

But Adam seemed to know where they were. He finally managed to slow his horse, and Sierra struggled to do the same. It wasn't until they were almost upon a building that Sierra was able to recognize a shack in the rain-filled darkness.

She nearly collapsed then and there with relief.

Sierra kicked her feet out of the stirrups with limp trembling muscles. Adam's arms were tight around her, and he half dragged, half carried her into the cabin. He kicked the door closed behind him, and they both collapsed onto the floor, breathless, exhausted—but alive.

As her breathing gradually slowed, she became aware that Adam's arms were still clasped about her waist, his hard chest against her back. But she was too exhausted to move.

"Are you all right?" he finally asked. He shifted her around to face him, pushing back the soggy strands of hair plastered to her forehead.

"I feel like I'm still riding a horse," she gasped.

"Thank God you're in one piece." Adam leaned his cheek against her

wet hair. Her hat had blown off long ago. "I was so afraid you'd fall."

"Not me. I never fall." Sierra managed to shake her head. "But I was worried about you."

"Sierra." Adam drew her head away from his shoulder and held it lovingly between his hands. "Sierra, I'm all right." And he covered her lips with his.

Sierra thought she'd never experienced anything so heavenly as that kiss. She wanted more, and she knew that Adam did, too, but their exhaustion extinguished the flame that tried to spring into life.

Adam gently moved Sierra to a place against the wall, then stood up. He fumbled in the dark until he found a gas lantern, then lit it with the automatic starter.

The steady light illuminated their surroundings. "That's better," he said, looking around the room.

Sierra made no effort to stand. She didn't think she could trust her legs just yet.

"There aren't any blankets. But there's a phone on the desk." Adam reached gingerly over the desk.

"Is it working?"

Adam listened, then replaced the receiver. "No. I'll try again later. I need to call Weldon and have him meet us with the horse trailer."

Sierra paused in the middle of taking off one very soggy boot. "Meet us? I don't want to leave now! I need to finish my research!"

"Sierra, don't be ridiculous. Look outside. This could last hours—days! It's too dangerous to stay."

Another clap of thunder underlined his words.

"Would you...would you still be my guide once the weather's cleared?" Sierra asked.

Adam looked up sharply.

"I don't have anyone else," she went on. "I know this is a wild-goose chase to you, but it's much more than that to me."

Sierra couldn't see Adam's face as he bent to pull off her other boot. He balanced them upside down against the wall before answering. "Why not? Maybe you'll prove the whole world wrong, after all."

Despite her wet clothing, suddenly she didn't feel so chilled anymore. "Thank you, Adam."

SIERRA WATCHED Adam sleep, feeling protective, content and restless all at the same time. She was going to miss him when she left.

If only she could stay. But she couldn't, not if she was going to see through her commitments. Not if she wanted to adopt a child.

On impulse Sierra checked her watch—4:00 a.m.—and picked up the phone again. Miraculously, there was a dial tone. Sierra immediately dialed Weldon's number. Better to call Weldon now and arrange for transportation tomorrow in case the storm continued.

"Hello, Weldon? This is Sierra Vaughn. I'm sorry to wake you, but..." Sierra quickly filled Weldon in.

"I'll get out there as soon as the storm's over," Weldon said, "but I

can't guarantee when that'll be. Sometime tomorrow, weather permitting."

"Thanks, I'll tell Adam. And good night."

Sierra breathed a sigh of relief. That was one worry out of the way. Then she tried her hotel.

"Saguaro Inn."

"Hello, this is Sierra Vaughn. I'd like to check for any messages, please."

"Oh, yes, Ms. Vaughn. I have a few here," said the woman at the reception desk. "A Tony Miller called. He said to tell you he needs all your notes and photos by the end of this week."

Sierra scribbled in her notebook. "Got it. Anything else?"

"A Mr. Rydell called."

"Mr. Rydell?" He was from the Colorado adoption agency!

"Yes. He said to tell you he had a child ready for you to adopt."

"For *me*?" Sierra almost danced with joy. "Go on."

"He said you had to be in his office to sign the papers by Friday morning or the girl would go to the next couple on the waiting list."

"A girl?" Sierra felt tears in her eyes. A daughter!

"A little four-year-old named Jennifer. Congratulations, ma'am."

"Yes, thank you. Good night." Sierra hung up, shaking with excitement that soon turned to dismay.

Friday was too soon! She looked in her notebook for Mr. Rydell's number. His office had an answering machine. She would call him and explain that she might be late. Sierra picked

up the phone to dial Mr. Rydell's number.

"Oh, no! No!"

The phone was dead. And an hour later there was still no dial tone.

Sierra bit her lip, then made her decision. She pulled on her boots and grabbed her saddlebags. She looked at Adam, asleep on the floor.

She wrote him a note.

"Wanted to check out one more thing. Called Weldon—he'll be at the Peralta trailhead sometime today. Will meet you there ASAP. Don't worry. Sierra."

Sierra reread her short message. She hesitated, then firmly closed the door behind her.

THE RAIN continued to fall as Sierra backtracked on the paint. The wind cut through the canyon; both horse and rider felt the sting of rain in their faces.

She checked her watch. It was now almost 10:30 a.m. She'd been riding all morning at a cautious pace, but another half hour should put her back at Black Top Mountain. According to her map work, Black Top Mountain hid the Lost Dutchman mine.

Sierra frowned. It wouldn't be an easy climb, not with the wind and the rain. She'd take only her camera, binoculars and a small folding pick-and-shovel set.

The wind was still strong when Sierra dismounted and picketed the horse, making certain he was as high above the soggy trail as possible.

Broken pieces of rock littered her

path. Despite her excitement, Sierra chose her footing carefully.

Sierra continued to climb, but without as much enthusiasm as before. She knew Adam would consider her an irresponsible idiot for going treasure hunting in this weather. Why couldn't he see that she was a grown woman who knew what she wanted? Those landmarks above showed how close she was to getting it.

Then she stopped and reached for the binoculars in her bags. She cupped her hand, shielding the lenses from the rain as she brought them to her eyes.

Sierra pointed the binoculars at the trail she'd just ridden. With any luck, all would be well.

"Oh, no," she cried. "That's just great!" There was the stallion. With Adam Copeland on his back.

She tucked the binoculars inside her jacket. The way she saw it, she had two choices. She could go back down to the trail and calmly wait for him, wasting a whole hour's climb. Or she could cover the scant remaining distance to her target above and find the Lost Dutchman.

Sierra made the logical choice. She put one foot in front of the other and took a step up. Then she stopped.

What if he was worried enough to start climbing the peak? What if he followed her muddy trail up the mountains, hurrying all the while. What if he slipped and fell?

What if he fell and died? She couldn't stand the thought that he might end up hurt—or worse.

"Damn you, Adam," she groaned. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

But she turned and started going back down.

She was more than two-thirds of the way down before she could see him clearly without benefit of the binoculars.

"Hurry up, Adam," she urged aloud.

Sierra saw Adam look up, as if he'd heard her. She knew that wasn't possible and wondered what had caught his attention. Seconds later she saw.

Behind horse and rider, a wall of water was rushing down the narrow canyon. The roar grew louder as the water drew nearer.

Sierra's stomach dropped with a lurch as she watched. There was no place for him to go! The sides of the canyon were too steep for man or horse to climb at that point in the trail. Adam couldn't make his way to higher ground until he reached the place where Sierra had picketed her horse.

Sierra threw herself forward and came careering down the base of the mountain toward the paint.

They weren't going to make it.

The water reached Adam, and horse and rider were swept up by the current.

"No!" Sierra screamed as she ran, stumbling in her haste, toward the paint.

She made it to Spot's side, but before she could scream again, Adam and the Appaloosa surfaced in different places, both fighting for air. In just seconds they would rush by her.

Sierra grabbed at the pommel and removed her lariat. How many thousands of cattle had she roped?

Enough to attempt the impossible and succeed?

"Please make my aim straight," she prayed as she shook out a loop.

She swung the rope above her head, its coil cutting through the rain. She watched Adam's black head sweep closer, closer, and her eye gauged speed and distance and she made adjustments for the wind. Just as she'd done so many times before.

Now! her instincts cried. *Now!*

The loop went sailing through the air, the sound of the flood drowning out its hiss. It flew over the water toward Adam just as the water sucked him down again.

"Adam!" Sierra shrieked as her body instinctively jerked back to pull the loop taut.

Sierra gasped as the weight wrenched her shoulders with a mighty tug. She had him around the waist! She sank to her knees and braced her body against the rock. The slab now cut into her middle, so she still had a clear view of the flood, but she couldn't see Adam. All she could see was swirling foam.

"Adam, hang on!"

She pulled as hard as she could, the rope biting into her leather riding gloves. Adam's head rose from the water, then his hands were grabbing the lifeline.

Sierra exhaled as they both took in a tremendous gulp of air. He was alive!

Her joy soon turned to panic as she tried to pull.

"Adam, I can't haul you in!" she yelled.

Already her arms were trembling,

and her shoulders felt as if they were being torn from their sockets.

Adam tried to pull himself in, only to be tossed about in the water like a rag doll.

Sierra gulped in a deep breath, held it and pulled. The rope cut deep into her palms through the wet leather gloves. Her back arched, aching with the effort, but Adam had his hands back on the rope.

She gave a great heave, gasping at the strain to her arms. She saw Adam's eyes above the water and could have cried at the hopelessness in them. Adam was afraid he wasn't going to make it.

Sierra pulled with all her strength, but she gained nothing this time. Her muscles could give no more. She couldn't save him.

She knew it. Adam knew it.

His eyes never left hers as one of his hands let go of the rope. Then she saw his other hand let go. His face told her what would come next.

"Don't, Adam! I love you!" Sierra screamed. She threw back her head and yanked with everything that was in her.

Sierra gritted her teeth and threw her body back in a mighty heave. She felt three things at once—the ground slamming into her back, a snap in her roping arm and slackening of her line. Was Adam on shore, or had the water claimed him? Either way, her line was free.

Sierra gave a violent shudder. She tried to move and would have screamed aloud if she'd had any strength left. The pain in her arm was excruciating. She didn't care, not if

Adam was all right. She closed her eyes.

The rain on her face stopped, but she could still hear it falling all around her. Confused, Sierra opened her eyes and looked up.

"Adam?"

THE RAIN had finally stopped when Sierra regained consciousness. She was lying on the ground, her head on something soft, her arm strapped to her chest.

"Adam?"

"Right here." His hand squeezed her free one and went on holding it. "You're on my lap."

"Oh." Sierra blinked, trying to clear her vision.

"Do you remember what happened?" Adam asked gently.

"The flood." She moved, then froze at the pain. "My arm."

"It's broken, Sierra. I splinted it as best I could. Try not to move it."

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes."

Sierra breathed a sigh of relief. "My horse?"

"He's fine."

The memory of the flood came rushing back. "And yours?"

Adam shook his head slightly. "I don't know."

"You shouldn't have come after me." Sierra closed her eyes and tried to ignore the pain in her arm. "Why didn't you wait for me at the ranger cabin?"

"You left in the middle of a storm to look for a nonexistent treasure,"

Adam said in a weary voice. "What did you expect me to do?"

"I didn't expect you to nearly drown," she whispered.

Sierra felt Adam's arms tighten around her.

"I didn't, thanks to you."

"No. But you could have." Suddenly she remembered something. She opened her eyes again and shifted in Adam's arms so that she could see his face. "Adam, I have to go back. I have to find the Dutchman," she said frantically.

"Not in a million years," he said in a voice filled with a compassion Sierra was too upset to hear.

"I have a daughter waiting. They'll give her to the next people on the list. If you won't let me find the Dutchman, would you go for me? I have my maps."

"Sierra, even if I was crazy enough to climb a mountain in the rain, do you honestly think I'd leave you here all alone? We're both leaving, and that's final."

Tears spilled from Sierra's eyes. "You can't make me go with you. If you'd left me alone, I'd have found the mine by now. I was almost there when I saw you on the trail and came back down to meet you."

Adam studied her carefully. "Is that when you saw the flood, Sierra?"

"No. If I'd waited that long, I never would've reached my lariat in time."

Adam's eyes bored down into hers. "If I wasn't in any danger when you saw me, why did you turn back, Sierra? Why—when you had what you wanted within your reach?"

"I..." She hesitated. What could

she say to him? That she wanted more than just his respect and admiration—that she wanted his love?

"I..."

Sierra couldn't tell him the truth. Her own family had rebuffed her affections. Tony Miller had rejected her. And every time Adam called her a treasure hunter, he did the same.

"I didn't want you to follow me up the mountain. I wanted to be alone when I found the treasure. That's why I came back down."

Adam exhaled slowly. Then he carefully eased out from under her and walked away, his head bowed under the weight of the rain.

*

SIERRA HAD to be admitted to the hospital. X rays showed that she'd broken both bones in her forearm. By the end of the third day, the bones had been set and a conventional plaster cast applied.

"And stay out of airplanes for at least a week," the doctor warned her. "The lower pressure at high altitudes will swell your arm tissues. Your cast won't fit right and those broken bones could shift."

Sierra could have wept at the words. Her last chance to make it home to straighten things out were gone. She had called Mr. Rydell; he had regretfully informed her that without the guarantee of a staff position with *Southwest History*, the four-year-old girl would be placed with another couple.

Sierra hadn't argued.

Horrible as that call had been, she'd

dreaded the next one even more. She'd have to tell Tony she hadn't completed the research and photography on the old water holes. And as she expected, Tony was not happy at all.

"I don't care if you are in the hospital! You'd better check yourself out and finish your work, or else we're both washed up. I'm going to try like hell to get us a two-week extension."

During her hospital stay, Sierra remained depressed, but Adam's visits had helped. He'd dropped in twice a day during visiting hours. They spoke little; she was too lethargic and in too much pain to chat. So Adam would bring out his blank music sheets and a pencil and write down his songs.

It wasn't until the day of her discharge that Sierra felt up to any prolonged conversation.

"Are you planning to fly home now?" Adam asked as he walked her to his truck.

"No. What do I have to go home to?" She couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I suppose I'll stay at the hotel for a while."

Adam eyed her suspiciously, knowing how impulsive she could be.

"If you promise to stay put, I'll finish your assignment for you."

"You'd do that for me?" Sierra felt her heart swell with love. "After everything that's happened?"

"Yes, I'm a fair photographer, and I know the water holes. I can get the job done. But you have to rest until I come back."

"You aren't leaving too soon, are you?" Sierra asked.

"Of course I am. I don't want you to lose your book deal, especially

since it may be a while before you can work again."

"I talked to Tony. He got us extra time."

"That helps," Adam said. He paused, then asked in a quiet voice, "Will you be all right financially? I don't like the thought of your struggling without an income, and I worry you'd rather not ask your family for help."

"That's right," Sierra replied. "I'm sure they're too busy with their ranching to care," she added.

"You're wrong. You still see your parents the same way you did as a child. Sierra, think. Your parents sent you to college, away from the ranch. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Well..."

"They didn't force you to stay. And if they were strict with you on the ranch, that's because they didn't want you hurt."

Sierra nodded, her mind whirling in confusion. Suddenly her parents didn't seem to be the ogres she'd always thought them.

"You need them, Sierra."

"I don't need them the way I need you!" she told him. "Don't you feel the same?"

Silence.

"Aren't you going to say something?"

Adam gave a heavy sigh. "I was afraid it might come to this. Sierra, go back home. My kind of life isn't for you. I need the desert. It's kept me fighting. But it's hardly the place to have a family. Sometimes I dream about it, but..."

His words trailed off, and Sierra

reached for him. "You can still have your family, Adam. Any woman would be proud to love you. I—I already do."

Adam avoided her hands. "I don't think what you're feeling is love, Sierra. Attraction—I can't deny we have that. Perhaps pity, gratitude... loneliness."

"That's not it at all!" she cried. "I love you!"

"I find that hard to believe. You've been known to mix fact and fiction before."

His words sounded a death knell in Sierra's heart. Had her lies denied her the chance of ever earning Adam's trust?

*

THREE DAYS later Sierra was back at the entrance to the Superstitions. She could not wait any longer, and needed to find Adam.

The ranger at the entrance to the Superstitions was surprised to see her back. "Adam went in by foot to look for his missing horse," he told her. "Why don't you wait for him here?"

But when the ranger saw how determined Sierra was, he gave in.

"How long do you intend to be?" he asked anxiously, noting Sierra's wince as she mounted the paint. "You only have enough food for a couple of days."

"As long as it takes for me to find Adam," she replied.

At the end of the day she reached her destination. Sierra saw that someone had set up camp at their previous

site. On closer inspection, she saw that the tent was Adam's.

He wasn't around, but Sierra knew he'd have to return before dark. She dismounted and awkwardly picketed the paint with her good arm. Maybe she'd lie down in the tent if the sleeping bag was there.

It was dark and chilly when Sierra awoke, but someone had covered her with a denim jacket, so the cold hadn't awakened her. The smell of cooking had.

She got up, carrying the jacket outside.

"Sleeping Beauty awakes." Adam's words broke the stillness of the night. "Are you hungry?"

Sierra nodded, struggling to sling the jacket over one shoulder and insert her good arm through one sleeve.

Sierra wished she could see his face more clearly in the flickering light of the fire.

"Did you find your horse, Adam?"

"No, not a trace. The force of the water was too much, I suppose."

Just remembering how the flood had nearly swept Adam away, too, made Sierra's skin crawl.

"I'm sorry, Adam. Maybe you should have taken the paint to search."

"More storms are predicted. That means more flooding. The paint belongs to Weldon, and I didn't want to take a chance with him."

"But you'd take a chance on your own life?" Her voice broke on the last words.

Adam's head jerked up at that. "You're hardly one to cry words of caution after everything you've done."

Why did you come back, Sierra? To make sure I didn't escape with the treasure?"

"No!"

"Don't look so surprised at the question," Adam snapped. "Why else would someone right out of the hospital come back here?"

"Because I love you."

Adam glanced up. "We've had this discussion before."

"We didn't finish. There's a reason—a very good reason—that I wanted a child badly enough to lie about the Dutchman." She took in a deep breath, then blurted, "You see, I can't bear children. Ever."

Adam reached for her hand. His was warm and comforting, and she didn't resist. "How long have you known?" he asked.

When Sierra had told him the whole story, his eyes narrowed at the cruelty of Tony's actions.

"Oh, Sierra...I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I don't have a complex about my problem. I may have lost a husband, but there was no way I was going to lose out on being a mother. I want a child, and adoption is the only way I'll have one."

"That's why you lied to me about the Dutchman."

"Yes. Everything else I told you is true. I *do* love you, Adam. Even before that terrible flood came down the canyon, I turned away from the Dutchman."

Adam brought her hand to his lips. "Sierra, I do love you. But there's no future for us."

"Why?" The anguish of her cry made him wince.

"The desert, its people and its music—they're my life. But this isn't a life for you. Or for a child."

"I'll stay here with you. It wouldn't matter as long as I'm with you!"

"You're wrong, Sierra. It *would* matter. It's taken me a long time to overcome my childhood. I'd want my family to have a normal life. I couldn't offer that here. And I don't know if I could move back to the city."

"But you said you loved me! We could find a way to—"

"No." The finality in that single word was devastating.

Sierra pulled her hand away. She stood up clumsily, her movements jerky. She couldn't, wouldn't break down in front of him. "I see. I think...I think I'll go to bed."

Adam stood up, too. "Take my tent," he said, almost brusquely. "I'll sleep outside."

"Fine," she replied, choking back the tears.

He pulled open the tent flap and they went inside. "Sit down. I'll take off your boots and help you undress."

Sierra sank to the ground. Adam removed her boots and socks, then slid his jacket from her shoulders.

Sierra felt the touch of his hands, and wondered if she could bear never feeling him, never seeing him again.

Her good arm crept around his waist. This might be the last time she could be close to him! She pressed her lips to his neck.

"Sierra, don't." Adam tried to pull away, but Sierra reached for his hand. "I can't give you any commitment."

"Then just give me something to remember, Adam. Just give me love."

"Sierra..."

"Kiss me."

He did. Then they were stretched out on the desert floor, the sand receiving the warmth of their bodies.

At first Adam's movements were slow, almost tentative because of her injury, but then he grew bolder at Sierra's heated response. She did what she had wanted to do ever since the flash flood, when she'd almost lost him. She touched, she caressed, she loved. It seemed the more she had of Adam, the more she wanted. Even though she could feel his heart pounding wildly, his mouth against hers, she couldn't get close enough.

And then, suddenly, she was. Sierra gasped with pleasure at the beauty of their joining.

When it was all over, they lay in each other's arms, spent with passion. Adam ran his fingers up and down her cast, as if the motion could heal the broken bones. Sierra found the action strangely soothing.

"How's it feel?" he asked.

"Like the rest of me," Sierra said, smiling. "Content."

Adam didn't reply at first. "Until you leave."

Sierra's blood suddenly ran cold, all traces of passion disappearing. "You'd still send me away?"

"Yes. Because I love you."

*

THE NEXT MORNING Sierra awoke alone. She was not surprised at Adam's absence. She dressed awkwardly, and was struggling with her

boots when she heard the whinny of horses.

She hurried outside in her stocking feet. Adam had just thrown a spare halter on his Appaloosa stallion, and was slowly leading him into camp.

"Good Lord," Sierra breathed aloud. Lightning Bolt was a mass of gashes and gouges. "It's a miracle this animal is still alive! Where did you find him?"

"He found us. Heaven knows how he's survived, or where he's been all this time."

A short while later Adam had fixed breakfast, packed the tent and saddled the paint. He helped Sierra mount up, then started walking, leading the Appaloosa by the picket line.

Sierra made several unsuccessful attempts to talk to Adam. In the excitement of finding the missing stallion and then the hurry to break camp, nothing had been said about the previous night.

They finally reached the pass that would take them out of the Superstitions. Sometime during their absence Weldon had dropped off Adam's truck and hitched the horse trailer to it. Adam helped Sierra down, then unsaddled and loaded the paint.

When the horses were ready, he came around and opened her truck door. "Where would you like me to drop you off?" he asked.

Sierra felt her heart contract. Was he in such a hurry to be rid of her?

"Sierra," Adam said, "go home. You do understand, don't you?"

"I only understand that you can't wait to see me go. Didn't last night mean anything to you? I love—"

Adam cut her off. "We need more than just love to build a future on, Sierra. You know that."

She bit her lip.

"There's a campground nearby," Adam said evenly. "We'll stop there so you can get ready."

TWO HOURS LATER Sierra was showered, changed and standing next to a taxi. It was settled. She would be flying back to the ranch.

"Here are your notes," Adam said. "I know you have Weldon's number. Would you call him and leave a message when you reach home?"

Sierra blinked back the tears and forced herself to take the notebook from his hand. She dropped it into her backpack, then awkwardly fumbled in her wallet. "Here's my business card. I've written the address of my parents' ranch on the back."

"I don't want to give you any false hopes, Sierra." But he took the card.

The stallion gave a pitiful nicker of pain, and Adam turned to look at the horse trailer. "I have to go, Sierra."

Sierra nodded.

"I..." Adam hesitated. "I wasn't going to tell you this. But I did check out that location you had pinpointed for the Lost Dutchman."

Sierra couldn't work up any excitement. It was all she could do to say, "And?"

"It was an old mine, but there was nothing inside except some rusty old beer cans."

"That's okay," she said dispassionately. "The way everything else has gone on this trip, I'm not surprised."

SIERRA SAT in the doctor's waiting area. Her cast had just come off, and she'd been X-rayed to see if her arm had completely healed.

"Sierra? The doctor will you see you now," the receptionist said. Mrs. Vaughn, who'd driven Sierra to the clinic, gave her daughter an encouraging smile.

The doctor took one final look at the X rays as Sierra walked in.

"This happened six weeks ago?" he asked.

"Yes, in Arizona, during a horseback expedition."

The doctor finally finished his examination. "Well, Ms. Vaughn, your arm looks great. Good luck."

She didn't need luck, Sierra thought to herself. She needed Adam. She and Tony had met their deadline and parted company. And in the weeks she'd been back in Colorado, not once had she heard from Adam.

So she forced herself to focus her energies on her family. Once they got over the initial shock of having her home, things settled into a surprisingly pleasurable routine.

Sierra was still waiting to hear about the *Southwest History* staff position. She didn't hold out much hope, but she had sent them a copy of the manuscript.

Her parents' warmth washed away the last traces of enmity between daughter and parents. Old relationships were strengthened, and everything would have been perfect if Sierra had only heard from Adam.

In desperation, she called Weldon in Arizona.

"I'm sorry, Sierra, but I haven't heard from Adam yet."

Sierra's spirits sagged at the news. "Have you received all the letters I've sent him, care of your address?"

"Yes, but Adam hasn't been around. Once his horse recovered, he left. I'm watching the horse, and I've got all your letters here unopened."

Then, one surprising morning, Sierra heard some news that temporarily took her mind off Adam.

"Sierra!" her mother called. "Telephone. It's for you!"

Sierra hurried to the kitchen and snatched up the receiver.

"Ms. Vaughn? It's Mr. Rydell from the adoption agency."

"Mr. Rydell?" Sierra couldn't hide her astonishment.

"Yes. Ms. Vaughn, are you still interested in adopting?"

"I... Of course I am, but you said I wasn't eligible. I don't have a permanent job, and I'm in between freelance assignments at the moment."

"Actually, Ms. Vaughn, it appears you do. I took the liberty of calling the people you said had made you a tentative job offer."

"You mean *Southwest History*? Mr. Rydell, nothing is firm there, and in fact—"

"But it is. They assured me that the job is yours. I'd like to place you back on the list, if that's acceptable."

Sierra's hand tightened on the receiver. "I'd love that, Mr. Rydell. But I have to be honest with you. The new job means I'll be moving to Arizona."

Mr. Rydell tossed aside her worries.

"I'll be working again by the time

my name gets to the top," Sierra added.

"That won't be necessary. We have a child for you right now."

Sierra nearly dropped the receiver.

"The little girl we'd originally planned for you went to the next people on the list. I'm afraid things didn't work out for the couple or the child. Jennifer is quite timid and is frightened of men. I think she might do better with a single female parent than a couple. If you're still interested, would you like to have her?"

"I can't believe it," she cried softly.

And Sierra became a mother, just like that. The paperwork and final interviews were rushed along, and four-year-old Jennifer became a Vaughn. Sierra fell head over heels in love with the little girl. Mothering came as easily, as naturally, as she'd always known it would.

Southwest History called before Jennifer arrived to confirm Mr. Rydell's news. She'd be starting her new job the following month.

Yes, her days were delightful, but when she kissed Jennifer and put her to bed, her delight fell away. The loneliness began. Sierra wrote to Adam almost every night, long letters full of anecdotes about Jennifer, ranch life and her family.

Then it was almost time to move to Phoenix. Sierra's mother wanted to take Jennifer into town to make some clothing purchases. Sierra would have loved to accompany them, but decided it would be easier to pack without Jennifer's eager "help." Instead she went with them in the car to the end of the

long driveway, then got out, planning to walk back to the house.

"Bye, Mommy!" Jennifer waved from the window of the car.

Sierra smiled. She would never cease to feel that warmth when Jennifer called her Mommy.

The car drove away. Sierra gave her daughter one last wave, then started back up the driveway toward the house.

"She's a beautiful child. What's her name?"

Sierra whirled around at the voice. "Adam!"

He was there, on the road by the gates that led into the driveway. Sierra stared at him in disbelief, hardly daring to trust her eyes or the hopeful pounding of her heart.

He smiled as he walked into the driveway. "Surely her name isn't the same as mine."

"No, it's Jennifer." Sierra could barely get the words out. "Jennifer Marie Vaughn."

Adam stopped and nodded. "Jennifer. It's almost as pretty as Sierra." He moved toward her, but Sierra didn't wait. She rushed straight into his arms.

"Adam, is it really you?" she asked, head thrown back to meet his gaze.

"It's me, Sierra. And please God, we'll never be apart again."

That was all Sierra needed to hear. She rested her head against his chest and cried. All the hours of loneliness dissolved under the healing power of those tears.

Adam held her even tighter, and his voice broke as he said, "Please don't,

sweetheart. I'm sorry this is such a shock. I should have warned you I was coming."

"Adam, Adam, just kiss me."

And he did. The prepared speech was forgotten as their lips met again and again, filling the emptiness in Sierra's heart.

And still her heart demanded more. It wasn't until he said, "I love you, Sierra Vaughn. I love you more than I can say," that she gave a long shuddering sigh of relief.

Sierra kissed the corner of his mouth. "How did you get here?"

"I took a taxi straight from the airport."

He reached for her hand, and they walked slowly up the long gravel drive.

"I'm so glad you're here." Sierra squeezed his arm again. "It seems as if I waited forever." She thought of the time that had passed.

"It felt that way to me, too."

"Why didn't you come back sooner?" she couldn't help asking, despite her happiness. Their separation had been too painful.

"I told you once before that I had nothing to offer you. After I left you, I headed back to Weldon's to take care of my horse. That's when the loneliness hit me. I wanted more out of life than sporadic contacts with friends. I wanted you."

"Did you get my letters, then?"

"Yes."

"But Weldon told me—"

"I made Weldon promise that if you called he was to say he hadn't heard from me. I didn't want you to build any false hopes..."

"Why didn't you at least answer any of my letters?" Sierra cried.

He walked her over to an old tree stump and gently urged her down. "I want you to know I read every one of them, Sierra. In fact, I kept track of you from the moment you left Arizona. I've talked to your father every week. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"But, Adam, I *wasn't* okay. I missed you dreadfully. No one ever told me you'd called!"

"I asked your father not to—not until I knew if I could make a living doing something beside guiding."

Sierra's heart went out to him. "These last months couldn't have been easy for you, Adam."

"With a future for both of us at stake, I had no other choice. Loving you, and not being able to offer you and Jennifer any kind of future—that was the hardest. A tent in the desert is no place for a family. I had to find out if music still offered me an alternative way of life."

"You still should have called me. I would have understood."

Sierra's hand crept into his as they started for the house again.

"Sierra, I couldn't, not until I was certain I could offer you and Jennifer the best. When you pulled me out of that flood, you gave me a second chance. Now I can only pray my new life will be worth sharing with you."

"A new life? With more than just...the desert?" Sierra dared to hope.

"The desert was my haven. But when you left, I realized I could never

feel at home there again. Not without you."

"Oh, Adam. I feel the same way about anyplace you aren't." She hugged him, and then they resumed walking.

"I decided to do something with my music. I approached the Apache Junction tribal museum and they agreed to my proposal. In fact, they're as excited about it as I am. I'll be recording the tribal songs I've learned, and they also want me to do a study on cultural crossovers. It's fascinating work," he added with a smile of satisfaction.

"I'm so happy for you! So proud..."

"And there's more. I've started composing again."

"Oh, Adam! That's wonderful."

They clung tightly to each other for a moment. Sierra was the first to lift her head. "When do you have to go back?"

"Far too soon. What about you, Sierra? Will you come back with me? Marry me? Start a new life with me?"

Deep joy filled her heart. "I'd go with you anywhere. Especially to Phoenix!"

Adam dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Congratulations. I should have said that earlier. *Southwest History* is in for a shake-up!"

Sierra laughed, a joyful sound.

"It all worked out, didn't it?" Sierra said. "The publisher was impressed enough with my original research to take a chance on me." She drew a deep breath. "Jennifer and I will be in Phoenix next week. So the

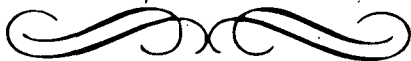
three of us will go back to Arizona together."

He took her in his arms again and kissed her fiercely. When he released her, he gazed into her shining eyes. Then he brought both hands up to cup her face, his expression solemn.

"As long as you want me, Sierra, I'll never leave. I swear it."

"I won't ever ask you to leave, Adam. If you go, it will be because *you* want to."

"Then, my love, you'll never be alone again."



READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #43

ACROSS

1. "Me and My _____"
4. Take care of
8. Radiance
12. Ginger drink
13. "Now _____ me down to sleep..."
14. Zhivago's beloved
15. Interim
17. Diminishes
18. Kick out
19. _____ Allan Poe
21. Meat choice
23. Pass laws
26. Tennis's Arthur _____
29. Baseball's Nolan _____
31. Female rabbit
32. Pay with plastic
34. Japanese temple
36. Five and five
37. Metallic fabric
39. God of war
40. _____ Hawkins Day
42. Eve's husband
44. _____ a time
46. Jargon
50. +
52. Crosby's style of singing
54. Routine

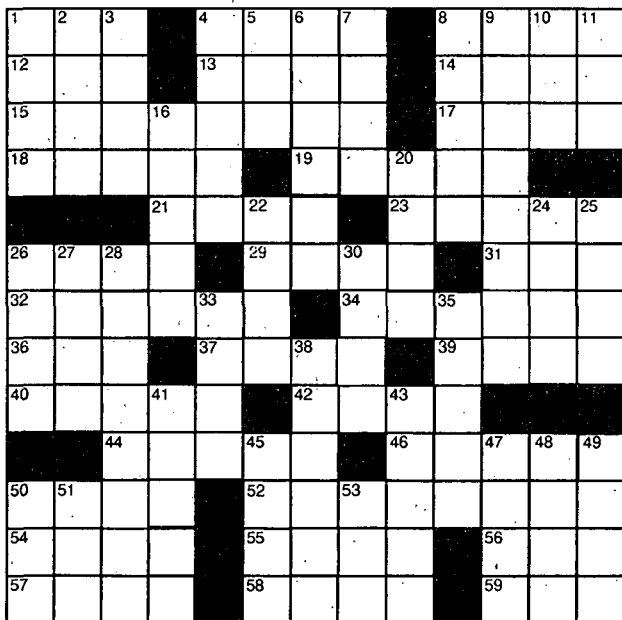
55. Swiss cheese feature
56. Gas guzzler
57. Evict
58. Parts of a rope
59. Lamb's mama

DOWN

1. Chess, e.g.
2. Host Trebek
3. Jump
4. Book's name
5. Actor Wallach
6. Specifically
7. Changed hair color
8. Garner
9. Certain retriever
10. Globe
11. Used to be
16. No way!
20. Actress Rowlands
22. Vicinity
24. Morse _____
25. Oolong and pekoe
26. Behaves
27. Mets' stadium
28. Donations
30. Mimicked
33. Frivolity

35. Street urchin
38. _____ of honor
41. Map feature
43. Medicinal lilies
45. Twinge
47. Pleasant
48. Bite
49. Monster
50. _____ and con
51. TV character Grant
53. Antique

Solution on page 39 of this issue.



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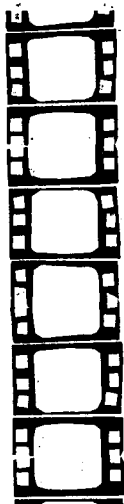




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STAR SIGNS—JULY & AUGUST



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

There should be real improvements in your home life with you enjoying greater security and happiness. Studying to increase your earning potential could also open up a whole new social scene.



CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

Travel and career are linked, and you may be thinking of making some life changes. Others should be supportive, but make sure to include them in your plans.



AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

It's a fun-filled happy month, with your recent problems fading away. Finances are also looking prosperous, and a new venture could prove exciting.



PISCES February 23-March 22

Trying to find some space for yourself could prove difficult this month as you will be much in demand. Relationships might prove tricky, especially if you are not prepared to give a little.



ARIES March 23-April 22

Other people seem intent on advising you even if you don't want to listen. However, some of what they say may be relevant to helping you achieve your heart's true desires.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

Time to get into shape—a new fitness routine will lift your spirits and give you reasons to start feeling good. A family get-together could bring someone new into your life.

STAR SIGNS (continued)

**GEMINI May 23-June 21**

You may feel frustrated by your lack of progress in certain aspects of your life. Try to use the time to relax and get a good view of what you really want to achieve.

**CANCER June 22-July 22**

Taking control of your life will make you feel much stronger and able to cope. A letter brings happy news and may encourage you to take a journey into your past.

**LEO July 23-August 22**

Now is an excellent time to concentrate on your home and the changes you need to make. Good news on the financial front helps to make those changes possible.

**VIRGO August 23-September 22**

A face from the past returns to affect your life in an unexpected way. There are also challenges in the workplace and you may need to make quick decisions.

**LIBRA September 23-October 22**

Exciting new developments should happen for you as long as you are open and willing to take a few risks. A special invitation sets your heart racing. Have fun choosing something special to wear!

**SCORPIO October 23-November 22**

Tough and pressing times are possible though you are well equipped to deal with your problems. Just have faith in yourself. A friend has an interesting proposition that lifts your spirits.

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To enter, follow the directions published. Method of entry may vary. For eligibility, entries must be received no later than March 31, 2000. No liability is assumed for printing errors, lost, late, non-delivered or misdirected entries.

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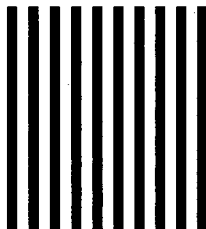
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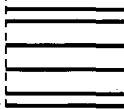
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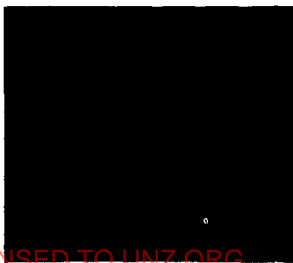
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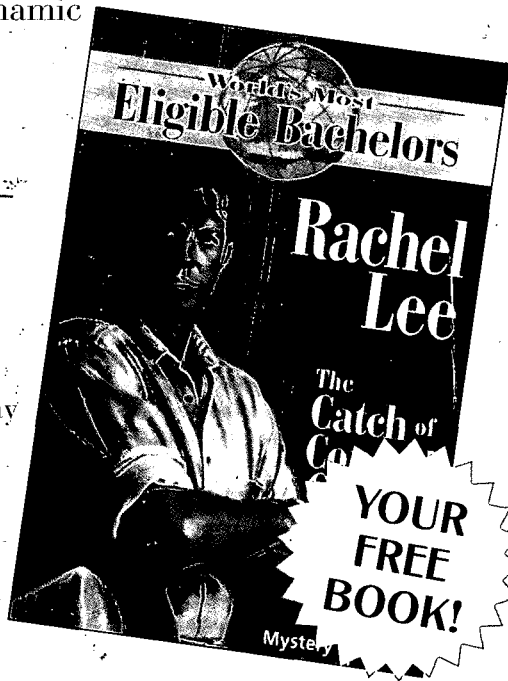
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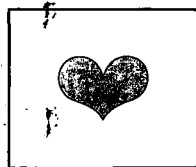


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